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## Hawthorne's Faith

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# Hawthorne's Faith

Research by Cecelia Little, advised by Dr. Margaret Reid

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# What I Expected...

From what I knew about Nathaniel Hawthorne prior to my research, I believed Hawthorne would primarily use his literary works to reveal American Transcendental philosophy, as well as some lessons he wished to share regarding morality and spirituality within the human person.

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# Brief Biography

*My interpretation and biography of Hawthorne's life*

## Hawthorne's Lineage and Life

Still considered one of the greatest and most influential American authors of all time, Nathaniel Hawthorne's works and personal life combine to produce an image of an almost impenetrable, deeply intricate man. Born on July 4, 1804 in the town of Salem, Massachusetts, Hawthorne lived in Salem for the majority of his life. He married Sophia Peabody in 1842, and had three children with her: a daughter named Una (born 1844), a son named Julian (born 1846), and another daughter, Rose (born 1851). The Hawthorne family experienced their share of stress and strain, but remained fairly close throughout their lives. After 1850, Hawthorne left Salem and rarely ever returned, abiding by his self-crafted and constantly repeated mantra "'I'm never coming home again'" (Miller xiii). Hawthorne's life and writings were primarily influenced by his early lineage, having descended from William and John Hathorne, a father and son who both left individual dark legacies of violent Puritan judgment. John Hathorne infamously left a dark legacy as one of the harshest magistrates during the Salem Witch Trials of the 1690s. Hawthorne prioritized themes of sin, fatherlessness, death, and the veiled soul, perhaps in a cathartic attempt to come to terms with his family's past and the grief he felt within his own lifetime. Hawthorne would never truly leave Salem behind, no matter where he traveled after 1850, obsessing over the town that had housed his ancestors for generations in nearly every work he ever produced. Most well-known for his novels such as *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), Hawthorne was a prolific writer from childhood until his death, producing five complete novels and dozens of short stories and tales throughout his life. Hawthorne died in his sleep on May 19, 1864 in Plymouth, New Hampshire, after possibly suffering some psychological deterioration in his later years.

# Guilt's Root in Patriarchal Sin

*Nathaniel Hawthorne and his Ancestors*

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*“But there is a fatality, a feeling so irresistible and inevitable that it has the force of doom, which almost invariably compels human beings to linger around and haunt, ghost-like, the spot where some great and marked event has given the color to their lifetime; and still the more irresistibly, the darker the tinge that saddens it.”*

*Hawthorne, “The Scarlet Letter” 186*

# Hawthorne and his Ancestors

According to the Hawthorne biography *Salem is My Dwelling Place* (1991) by the New York University English Professor Edwin Haviland Miller (which I have used for the majority of my biographical research), Hawthorne's ancestors and the early loss of Hawthorne's father were some of the most profound and obvious influences on the author's writing and personality. Influences aside, Hawthorne had a distinguished personality and presence of his own, well-noted by his family and contemporaries. Those who had opportunities to observe Hawthorne in public described the man as attracting constant attention, though he tried (quite obviously) to avoid the public's gaze. Miller, in his biography, states that Hawthorne "rarely looked a person in the eye, lowering his gaze bashfully and modestly as though in fear of a world with which he wanted to deal as little as possible" (Miller 1). The biographer describes Hawthorne as a unique man "Preoccupied[...] with the internal rather than the external landscape" (Miller 1) of his and other's souls and lives: the statement applies to both Hawthorne and Hawthorne's treatment of his various literary characters. Despite how desperately Hawthorne might have wanted to avoid the public eye, it was impossible for him to do so. Throughout each and every one of Hawthorne's works, the author expressed an incredible amount of psychological and sociological knowledge; intimate knowledge of the human soul and psyche that Hawthorne would have too little access to if he did not engage in public life and discourse.



## Hawthorne and his Ancestors (continued)

Despite his engagement (or lack thereof) with the public, and any judgement of his contemporaries, Hawthorne was most deeply affected and shaped by his perceptions of his paternal lineage, and by the loss of his father when he was only four years old. Even as a young child, Hawthorne was aware of the emotional and social consequences following from his father's early inability to care for his family (Elizabeth, Hawthorne's mother, was left just over two hundred dollars after her husband's death, and after all outstanding debts were paid), and his maternal grandfather's assumption of their financial and physical care (Miller 28). The Hawthorne children lived well and were loved by their grandfather Richard Manning, but the family dynamic was not what society might have expected, especially in light of the fame and attention that surrounded the previous generations of Hawthornes. A great majority of Hawthorne's literary characters were fatherless, and despite having a kind father (though only for a few years), Hawthorne never mentioned his father's death. Substituting his own deceased father with likenesses of his earlier, more controversial relatives, Hawthorne converted both William and John Hawthorne, "two pillars of the patriarchal Puritan world[,] into substitute father figures and experienced an imaginary but real rivalry both to excel them and to prove himself worthy of their approval" (Miller 22). Many people believed, and still believe today, that Hawthorne's works are largely or primarily autobiographical, though he personally changed his tone regarding the matter during his lifetime, sometimes admitting to writing himself into his stories, sometimes denying it (Miller 8).

# The Ancestors (continued)

Lines indicate timeline and family lineage

## William Hathorne (1607-1681)

- Sailed from England to America in 1630
- Was a hugely distinguished “deputy to the General Court of Massachusetts and subsequent speaker of the House” (Miller 20) and served as magistrate and judge
- “Hathorne pursued the wicked ‘like a bloodhound’[...] Hathorne seemingly enjoyed his powers and distinctions and, if guilt-ridden at all, was no doubt convinced that his deeds were performed in the service of his God, who, like Jonathan Edwards’s, was a vengeful deity that placed obedience above mercy” (Miller 21). He was especially harsh towards women

## John Hathorne (son of William) (1641-1717)

- Married a 14 year old girl at the age of 34, and “Like his father he tyrannized over defenseless women” (Miller 22)
- Served as the “deputy to the General Court in Boston” (Miller 22) and a magistrate during the 1690s infamous Salem witch trials

## Joseph Hathorne (son of John) (1692-1762)

- Ship captain turned farmer

# The Ancestors (continued)

- **Daniel Hathorne** (son of Joseph) (1731-1796)

- Ship commander during the Revolutionary War
- Very well-known and respected in Salem
- Was married at 27 Union Street, where Hawthorne would later be born

- **Nathaniel Hathorne** (son of Daniel) (1775-1808)

- Married neighbor Elizabeth Manning, became parents of Hawthorne
- Striking physical resemblance between Daniel-Nathaniel-Hawthorne
- Nathaniel died of disease in 1808, leaving his family with very little money after all their debts were paid. Hawthorne was almost 4 at the time, and a great deal a psychological trauma followed. No family member witnessed Nathaniel's burial, so psychologically, he was left unburied (Miller 26)

- **Nathaniel Hawthorne** (son of Nathaniel) (1804-1864)

- Born Nathaniel Hathorne, Hawthorne legally added the "w" to his name to place physical and linguistic separation between himself and his Hathorne ancestors. All Hawthornes descended from him maintained the changed spelling

In “The Custom House”, Hawthorne explicitly refers to his years working in the Salem Custom house, and to his ancestors William and John. Though he highly disapproved of his ancestors’ more violent behaviors, he involved them in many of his works, referring to them directly (as he does below) or fashioning them into renamed and fictionalized characters:

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*“He was a soldier, legislature, judge; he was a ruler in the Church; he had all the Puritani traits, both good and evil. He was likewise a bitter persecutor; as witness the Quakers, who have remembered him in their histories, and relate an incident of his hard severity towards a woman of their sect, which will last longer, it is to be feared, than any record of his better deeds, although these were many.” (Hawthorne, “The Scarlet Letter” 126)*

**A note:**

It was “The Scarlet Letter” that initially piqued my interest in Hawthorne’s narrator voice. Though I have been taught to generally consider the literary Narrator as an entity separate from any author, I now cannot help but immediately identify the one with the other in Hawthorne’s works. I am absolutely certain, after now having read *The Scarlet Letter*, *The House of the Seven Gables*, *Fanshawe*, and a number of his short stories, that Hawthorne’s narrator is most often, if not nearly always, the author himself. The narrator in question is certainly a man, judging from his commentary on the station and character of women. He is also a citizen of Salem, or nearby, judging from the intimate knowledge the narrator has of the area. The narrator is eloquent and wise, as Hawthorne was in life, and tends to observe and predict not just the actions of the people within the stories, but also their internal characters, as any omniscient narrator should. While some argue that the narrator of “The Custom House” of *The Scarlet Letter* alone is Hawthorne’s own voice, and all other narrators are simply voices similar to his, I am certain that the narrative voices of Hawthorne’s literature have collectively presented enough autobiographical knowledge to gather a complex and intimate conception of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s personality, life, and soul.

# Providence and Puritanism

*Nathaniel Hawthorne's Relationship with God*



*“‘Wretched and sinful as I am, I have had no other thought than to drag on my earthly existence in the sphere where Providence hath placed me.’” –the minister Arthur*

*Dimmesdale*

*Hawthorne, “The Scarlet Letter” 289*

## Hawthorne's Relationships with God: *The Scarlet Letter*

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne crafts a story revealing a woman drowning in sin, and her relationships between herself and God, her daughter, and the society around her. Unlike most narrators, Hawthorne's narrator is omniscient enough to know the internal thoughts and feelings of his characters, but sensitive enough, like a close friend, to avoid revealing more than the character might wish to themselves. Hester Prynne, the main character, is deemed an adulterer after having an extramarital affair, resulting in the birth of her daughter. The story begins around the time Hester's legal punishment comes to an end, and she is released from confinement. One of the most potent aspects of Hester as a character is her relationship with God and religion. Hawthorne places Hester in Salem during a time period in which Puritanism was still the overwhelming religion, meaning Puritan ministers and leaders (like Hawthorne's ancestors) decided Hester's punishment. While Hawthorne seems to have had the propensity to discuss sin, Hawthorne's conception of God is not an overwhelmingly negative one. Within *The Scarlet Letter*, God is mentioned around thirty times, whether a character is invoking God's name, or discussing His guidance or judgment. The Divine is mentioned around ten times. These numbers merely show the prevalence of religious discussion within the novel, but the next slide gives some specific examples of language about God.



## Hawthorne's Relationships with God: *The Scarlet Letter*

The word “Providence” is mentioned in the religious context eleven times throughout the novel...

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“**Providence** had meditated better things for me than I could possibly imagine for myself” (Hawthorne, “The Scarlet Letter” 153)

““For Hester Prynne's sake, then, and no less for the poor child's sake, let us leave them as **Providence** hath seen fit to place them!”” (Hawthorne, “The Scarlet Letter” 216)

“He himself, on the other hand, with characteristic humility, avowed his belief, that, if **Providence** should see fit to remove him, it would be because of his own unworthiness to perform its humblest mission here on earth.” (Hawthorne, “The Scarlet Letter” 221)

“Hester had often fancied that **Providence** had a design of justice and retribution, in endowing the child with this marked propensity” (Hawthorne, “The Scarlet Letter” 273)

“And the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale's best discerning friends, as we have intimated, very reasonably imagined that the hand of **Providence** had done all this, for the purpose—besought in so many public, and domestic, and secret prayers—of restoring the young minister to health.” (Hawthorne, “The Scarlet Letter” 226)

## Hawthorne's Personal Relationship with God

In his letters, Hawthorne was both humorous and surprisingly revealing when discussing religious matters. Including religious people and the name of God in countless stories, Hawthorne affirmed his belief in God through these (below) and numerous other comments. With an inclination toward preferring a direct relationship with God rather than one through a church or religious leader, Hawthorne's characters affirm his individualistic spirituality as well. I would argue that some personal relationship with God is necessary for an author to have the ability to include those same personal relationships so vividly and realistically in their characters. Hawthorne had many issues with his Puritan roots, and would never claim himself to be a Puritan during his lifetime. Though deeply religious and imbuing his written works with religious sentiments, Hawthorne himself never committed to any organized religion. This excluded both the Puritanism his ancestors were devoted to and Catholicism, which was criticized and rebuked in the early United States during Hawthorne's lifetime. During the darker periods of his life, Hawthorne turned to God to find respite from the grief and guilt he carried.

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*“Let us thank God for having given us such ancestors; and let each successive generation thank him, not less fervently, for being one step further from them in the march of the ages”*  
-Nathaniel Hawthorne (Miller 20)

*“I am disposed to thank God for the gloom and chill of my early life, in the hope that my share of adversity came then, when I bore it alone, and that therefore it need not come now”*  
-Nathaniel Hawthorne (Miller 27)

# Veiled Sin

*Nathaniel Hawthorne's Obsession with Sin*

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*“All persons, chronically diseased, are egotists, whether the disease be of the mind or body; whether it be sin, sorrow, or merely the more tolerable calamity of some endless pain, or mischief among the cords of mortal life. Such individuals are made acutely conscious of a self, by the torture in which it dwells. Self, therefore, grows to be so prominent an object with them, that they cannot but present it to the face of every casual passer-by. There is a pleasure—perhaps the greatest of which the sufferer is susceptible—in displaying the wasted or ulcerated limb, or the cancer in the breast; and the fouler the crime, with so much the more difficulty does the perpetrator prevent it from thrusting up its snake-like head, to frighten the world; for it is that cancer, or that crime, which constitutes their respective individuality.”*

*Hawthorne, “Egotism; or, The Bosom-Serpent” 785*

## Hawthorne and Sin

Throughout his works, Hawthorne mentioned sin over and over again. This was actually one of the first themes I picked up on, after noticing the repetition of the word “veil” and their frequent use. On the previous slide, I placed a quote from one of Hawthorne’s short stories entitled “Egotism: or, The Bosom-Serpent”. As one of the first Hawthorne stories I read, the content of this story originally piqued my interest in Hawthorne’s works. While an observant reader might take pause at this passage to protest its claims, I am inclined to agree with Hawthorne. Disease and severe physical ailments often stir powerful and personal emotions in their bearers, enough for those bearers to take their ailment up as a mantle, or at least a deeply personal and intrinsic portion of their identity. Hawthorne attempts something daring and almost dangerous here. Within “Egotism: or, The Bosom-Serpent”, of course, the man in question is clearly plagued with some mental disease. He runs around from townspeople to townspeople, proclaiming each have within their chest a serpent, borne of some character flaw or past sin. Hawthorne here conflates the ideas of mental disease and sin, saying explicitly that both can equally consume a person and their identity, and giving an example in which both are involved.

## Hawthorne's Relationship with God: *The Scarlet Letter*

Readers can clearly see an example of “Egotism’s” identity-enveloping sin in Hester Prynne of *The Scarlet Letter*. Not only does she literally wear a physical sign of her sin (the letter A, for adultery) on her breast, quite near her heart, but she sees her sin reflected in the daughter born through her adulterous affair. Hester, upon release from prison, immediately and guiltily believed she would be considered “the figure, the body, the reality of sin” (Hawthorne, “The Scarlet Letter” 186). Hester considered herself quite religious, and came from a religious family, but refused to pray due to the fear that her sins and past deeds will taint her words. Despite the weight her sin bore, and her personal inability to bring herself to prayer, Hester presents herself as having an unmediated relationship with God. Hester’s faith does not rest in the minister Arthur Dimmesdale, emphasized by the fact he served as the male counterpart to her adulterous affair. Nor does her faith rest in any other man—instead, her faith rests in God alone, though she may be judged by her peers as well as by God. This relationship between sin, Hester Prynne, and God can be viewed as mimicking Hawthorne’s guilt over his past, and preference to practice religion as he, not a minister, or his peers, or his family, saw fit.

## Hawthorne's Relationship with God: *The Scarlet Letter*

Unlike her mother, Pearl detested society with the “bitterest hatred” (Hawthorne, “The Scarlet Letter” 198), and “never created a friend” (Hawthorne, “The Scarlet Letter” 198), as she was perfectly content with herself and the very real world around her. I cannot help but see a bit of Hawthorne's personality shine through here—while Hawthorne did not hate society, and did have some dear and loyal friends, he existed within a state of his own perceived reality, giving off sometimes a supernatural likeness, whether through his literature or through his distant yet ever-curious personality. Hawthorne might likewise be identified with Pearl if the girl is taken as a representation of Hawthorne's questions or doubts about God (if any did exist). She verbally denies God as a child, despite knowing “well enough who made her; for Hester Prynne, the daughter of a pious home, [...] talk[ed] with the child about her Heavenly Father” (Hawthorne, “The Scarlet Letter” 213). Pearl could also stand simply for Hawthorne's denial of organized religion. A rebellious and often startling child, Pearl was highly introspective, and identified herself as having been “plucked by her mother off the bush of wild roses, that grew by the prison-door” (Hawthorne, “The Scarlet Letter” 213). Hester holds a present fear throughout the entirety of the novel that Pearl will become, or is, the physical manifestation of her sin, just as Hawthorne cannot seem to escape the sin carried by his familial relations. At times, Hester even acts somewhat intimidated by or scared of her daughter, due to her almost supernatural visage, yet all-too complex knowledge about the reality of the world. Despite her age, Pearl is a deep, passionate character, a tiny imaginative rulebreaker who was “imbibing her soul from the spiritual world” (Hawthorne, “The Scarlet Letter” 195). Hawthorne often used the supernatural in his literature to treat matters difficult to discuss, from his relationship with God, in the case of *The Scarlet Letter*, to the sins of his patriarchal relations, exemplified by Colonel Pyncheon in *The House of the Seven Gables*. In that novel, Colonel Pyncheon stole the land of the poorer Matthew Maule, and led Maule to an untimely death, before dying an unnatural (and perhaps supernatural) death years later. Pyncheon is known to return in his evil and twisted glory if a particular mirror within the Pyncheon house is viewed.

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*“‘Why do you tremble at me alone?’ cried he, turning his veiled face round the circle of pale spectators. ‘Tremble also at each other! Have men avoided me, and women shown no pity, and children screamed and fled, only for my black veil? What, but the mystery which it obscurely typifies, has made this piece of crape so awful? When the friend shows his inmost heart to his friend; the lover to his best beloved; when man does not vainly shrink from the eye of his Creator, loathsomely treasuring up the secret of his sin; then deem me a monster, for the symbol beneath which I have lived, and die! I look around me, and, lo! on every visage a Black Veil!’” –the minister Mr. Hooper*

*Hawthorne, “The Minister’s Black Veil” 383–384*



## Hawthorne's Veil

Well-known as a highly private man, Hawthorne, as with sin, had a certain interest in veils and veiled figures. Hawthorne, according to the biographer Miller, “dressed in black and often wore a long mantle which on occasion he drew about himself, veiling his face and elongating his lithe body with black drapery, like a mysterious stranger out of a gothic novel” (Miller 2). The author was viewed by many as being physically handsome, yet “his effect upon observers was magnetic and enduring” (Miller 2) both physically *and* psychologically. Despite avoiding most eye contact, Hawthorne’s observers were fascinated by his eyes, grey in color but often confused for both striking blue and dark, brooding black. Unsurprisingly, Miller cites that “George Hillard, Hawthorne’s friend and lawyer, observed that his ‘eyes would darken visibly under the touch of passing emotion, like the waters of a fountain ruffled by the breeze of summer’” (Miller 4). In the confidence and relation between he and a dear friend, “Hawthorne commanded incredible loyalty—and returned it” (Miller 2), though Hawthorne had few dear friends, keeping himself behind his own physical and psychic veils even sometimes to his own wife and children. On the next slide, I included several examples of veils with Hawthorne’s writing.

## A Few Examples of Hawthorne's Veils in Text

“Thus, from beneath the black **veil**, there rolled a cloud into the sunshine, an ambiguity of sin or sorrow, which enveloped the poor minister, so that love or sympathy could never reach him.”  
(Hawthorne, “The Minister’s Black Veil” 380)

“But, as thoughts are frozen and utterance benumbed, unless the speaker stand in some true relation with his audience, it may be pardonable to imagine that a friend, a kind and apprehensive, though not the closest friend, is listening to our talk; and then, a native reserve being thawed by this genial consciousness, we may prate of the circumstances that lie around us, and even of ourself, but still keep the inmost Me behind its **veil**.” (Hawthorne, “The Scarlet Letter” 121)

“A slumberous **veil** diffused itself over his countenance, and had an effect, morally speaking, on its naturally delicate and elegant outline, like that which a brooding mist, with no sunshine in it, throws over the features of a landscape.” (Hawthorne, “The House of the Seven Gables” 448)

“I, perhaps, like most other mortals, have sorrows dark enough to be typified by a black **veil**.” (Hawthorne, “The Minister’s Black Veil” 378)

“Looking aside at Clifford’s face, and seeing the dim, unsatisfactory elegance and the intellect almost quenched, she would try to inquire what had been his life. Was he always thus? Had this **veil** been over him from his birth?—this veil, under which far more of his spirit was hidden than revealed, and through which he so imperfectly discerned the actual world,—or was its gray texture woven of some dark calamity? Phoebe loved no riddles, and would have been glad to escape the perplexity of this one.”  
(Hawthorne, “The House of the Seven Gables” 475)

# Hawthorne's Veil

From what I have read and studied thus far, it is quite obvious that Hawthorne felt as though he had a great deal to hide from his friends, family, and especially from the world around him. Yet human nature rarely allows the creative and self-reflective to exist solely within themselves, and the need for human contact and identification with others is sought even without the knowledge of those seeking. It is well-known that Hawthorne carried a great deal of guilt regarding the distasteful, sinful, and sometimes evil actions of his ancestors, despite the patriarchal structure of his Puritan lineage and society around him causing him to maintain a want for those ancestors' approval. Hawthorne was respectful towards women and was loved by his wife dearly, though many of his stories depict highly judgmental, adultering, or otherwise sinful women. Despite facing the trauma of losing his father at a young age, Hawthorne often avoided discussing the pain directly, instead replacing his characters' father figures with the likenesses of those infamous male ancestors William and John. Hawthorne believed that, with romance literature, "A high truth, indeed, fairly, finely, and skillfully wrought out[...] may add an artistic glory, but it is never any truer, and seldom more evident, at the last page than at the first" ("The House of the Seven Gables", Novels 352), and often included these "truths" in his writings, but rarely discussed problems of the world directly. Instead, Hawthorne hid behind his veil literally, with clothing and a shy demeanor, and literarily, working through psychological trauma and grief vicariously and anonymously through his characters.

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# What I Concluded...

The study of Nathaniel Hawthorne's biography and works has rendered a new image of the author and his beliefs for me. Hawthorne was a deeply religious man, though, like myself, inclined towards holding a personal relationship with God that was likely misunderstood or mischaracterized during his lifetime. He was torn, fighting to reconcile his darker ancestors and the actions they took in Puritanism's name with his strong belief in God and his ancestors' unchangeable role in his family history. Hawthorne believed in the concept of the human soul and revered their existence. He seemed to view souls as commonly tainted by sin, and needing to be veiled, shrouded, and held privately away from the world. Treating many of his characters more like a close friend than an omniscient narrator, Hawthorne kindly avoids revealing the innermost secrets and thoughts of his characters, allowing them to reveal their secrets to the reader as any stranger might. Through his narrative voice, Hawthorne treats himself as privately and reservedly as his narrator treats his characters. Taken as a whole, these revelations might incrementally allow the intuitive reader to see into Hawthorne's own mind and spirituality. Readers of Hawthorne can learn the philosophical fusion of a man's grief caused by a dark family past, the trauma and heartache caused by the loss of a father, and the reconciliation of a relationship between God and a man who could not commit to church orthodoxy, and who saw human sin everywhere he looked, including within his own mind, and within his own literary creations.

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Thank you for reading! This study fascinates me and will likely evolve into my senior thesis, so please feel free to reach out to me with any questions and comments at [clittle1@friars.providence.edu](mailto:clittle1@friars.providence.edu).

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