

**Hypocrisy in *The Scarlet Letter***

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## Outline

**Thesis statement:** The analysis of the main characters of *The Scarlet Letter* and their situations and how they tie into the overall theme of the story shows that Hawthorne is focusing on hypocrisy rather than adultery.

- I. Hypocrisy as the theme of the story
- II. Hester Prynne
  - A. her character
  - B. the effects of her alienation
  - C. her hypocrisy
- III. Arthur Dimmesdale
  - A. his character
  - B. the effects of keeping his secret
  - C. his hypocrisy
- III. Roger Chillingworth
  - A. his character
  - B. the effect he has on Dimmesdale and Hester
  - C. his hypocrisy

## Hypocrisy in *The Scarlet Letter*

*The Scarlet Letter* is full of hypocrites; every character is, in some degree, a hypocrite. The townspeople and officials are because of their views of Hester and how they treat her. The main characters that will be discussed in this paper are prime examples of hypocrisy. The people that they are and the people that they become through the circumstances of their situations show this. Although adultery is discussed and condemned by the townspeople and the effects of the sin are evident, this is not the main focus of the book. The analysis of the main characters of *The Scarlet Letter* and their situations and how they tie into the overall theme of the story shows that Hawthorne is focusing on hypocrisy rather than on adultery.

Hester Prynne shall be the first to be discussed; after all she is, in part, responsible for the suffering and resulting hypocrisy in the story. Hester is a strong woman; she takes the burden that her sinfulness has placed upon her. The other women of the community seem to be jealous of her great beauty. She embroiders the "A" that she must wear which makes it seem as though it is not a symbol of punishment, but some award that sits upon her chest.

"The heroic traits awakened in her character by her position were the great self-sustaining properties of woman, which, in tribulation and perplexity, elevate her so far above man. The sullen defiance in her, was imparted to her by society." (Loring 157) After and throughout the years of her alienation she had suppressed her true character. She wears drab clothes and conceals her long, beautiful hair at all times, except in the forest scene. Hester, as a result of those years of alienation, had fallen into hypocrisy.

“Her fall into hypocrisy, though not excusable, is understandable psychologically in terms of constraints placed upon the development of her personality, while her eventual triumph over bad faith is Hawthorne’s most hopeful statement of the possibility of a mature, experienced human integrity” (Harris 58-59). “Not only must she struggle not to lose faith in her fellow mortals in the abstract, but as her hypocrisy deepens we sense in her a growing mistrust for the only individuals toward whom she might be expected to feel sympathy and understanding” (Harris 61). Hester projects her own hypocrisy onto others, including Dimmesdale. She doesn’t trust him because she doesn’t trust herself (Harris 62).

Arthur Dimmesdale will be the next character to be discussed, being the second party in the act of adultery. Mr. Dimmesdale is a saintly minister who, through his sermons and good nature, has won the hearts of his parishioners. He is a good man, but he is fearful of ruining his saintly image by letting out his guilty secret. On Election Day, however, Dimmesdale finally does reveal his hidden sin, but he does so at his dying moment to absolve his soul not because he is a strong man. Were he a strong man, he would have come forward with his secret rather than allowing it to slowly destroy him.

His delicate sensibilities, his fervor, his influence on those about him, and above all, his sin, committed when the tides of his heart rushed in and swept away all the bulrush barriers he had heaped up against them, through the years of studious self-discipline, show what a spirit, what forces, he had. Against none of these forces had he sinned. And yet he was halting, and wavering, and becoming more and more perplexed and worn down with woe, because he had violated the dignity of his position and had broken a law which his education had made more prominent than any other law in his own soul .(Loring 155)

Mr. Dimmesdale was weakening more each day because of the guilt that he had inside of his heart. Hawthorne shows this throughout the story by Mr. Dimmesdale’s constant habit

of putting his hand to his heart.

“Be not silent from any mistaken pity and tenderness for him; believe me, Hester, though he were to step down from a high place, and stand there beside thee, on thy pedestal of shame, yet better were it so, that to hide a guilty heart through life. What can thy silence do for him except it tempt him-yea, compel him, as it were- to add hypocrisy to sin?” (Hawthorne 63) In this appeal from Dimmesdale to Hester while she is on the scaffold, much is said about Dimmesdale. Even though he is pleading to Hester to give the name of her fellow sinner, he doesn't really want her to reveal his identity. But he himself gives the consequence of his silence and therefore reveals his hypocrisy. “He rationalizes his every failure, with some reference to his need to be an effective minister” (Johnson 63). Dimmesdale hides behind his public self. “With Dimmesdale in particular, the ontological question itself becomes amoral issue, as the real Dimmesdale can finally be characterized as neither a hypocrite or as a saint, unless he can be somehow seen as both” (Harris 58). Dimmesdale himself sees his ugly inner self through his many long examinations in front of the mirror. This insight further intensifies his ill condition and insanity. But when he runs out to the scaffold that night he is still concerned with his saintly image somewhat because he just meekly stands there as his fellow minister passes by instead of letting his presence be known.

Roger Chillingworth is the last character that will be discussed. He is first shown to us as a scholarly man who is physically deformed. He has a scientific and inquisitive nature, and he deals with herbs and things making medicines. He is introduced as the physician. Chillingworth and Dimmesdale become friends and eventually, because of the urge of Dimmesdale's friends, come to live in the same house. “Chillingworth maniacally uses his skill as a physician to probe, control, and otherwise torture the ailing Dimmesdale” (Johnson 63). “...Roger Chillingworth's aspect had undergone a remarkable change while he had dwelt in the town, and especially since his adobe with Mr. Dimmesdale. At first his

expression had been calm, meditative, scholar like. Now, there was something ugly and evil in his face, which they had not previously noticed, and which grew still more obvious to sight the oftener they looked upon him” (Hawthorne 117). “Yet Dimmesdale would perhaps have seen this individual’s character more perfectly, if a certain morbidness, to which sick hearts are liable, had not rendered him suspicious of all mankind. Trusting no man as his friend, he could not recognize his enemy when the latter actually appeared” (Hawthorne 120). These two passages from the text summarize the harmful aspects of their relationship. Chillingworth is not a friend but a dangerous fiend and Dimmesdale is subject to his torture because the torture that he has already inflicted upon himself doesn’t allow him to see what is happening.

Chillingworth is a hypocrite because he believes that he is right in mentally torturing and killing Dimmesdale. He doesn’t think any of the evil things he has done are wrong. He still thinks that he is a scholarly man, but he is really an evil man who has lost his old ways along with his mind.

Through the explanations of the characters and their situations and the realizations they must face, the thesis statement has proven true. This story is based around the initial sin, without which the story wouldn’t have been able to be written. Even so, Hawthorne focuses in on the hypocrisy that stems from this sin of adultery. The story discusses the characters’ morals and shows how these morals change or deteriorate to justify or face their guilt and hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is the overall theme of this story.

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