

Effects of sin in the scarlet letter

Literature, Russian Literature



Unfortunately sin can often lead to isolation. In *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Hester Prynne, a beautiful young woman who is chastised for adultery, and Arthur Dimmesdale, Boston's beloved minister who is the father of Hester's baby, both begin doleful lives of isolation after Hester's sin is revealed. After Hester is sent to Boston by her husband, who says he will shortly join her, she has an affair with the town's preacher, Arthur Dimmesdale, which results in a daughter, Pearl.

Condemned for her sin of adultery by the austere Puritan government, Hester is forced to wear a scarlet letter A on her dress at all times as a punishment for her crime. Though Hester Prynne is a beautiful, graceful woman who is involved in the community, she begins a secluded life of isolation after she is punished for her crime of adultery. Serving as a visible sign of her crime, the scarlet letter A isolates Hester from her community. In addition, Hester encounters isolation when she is required to move to a dreary cabin on the outskirts of town. Furthermore, Hester is isolated from her one true love, Arthur Dimmesdale, when her husband, who goes by the alias Rodger Chillingworth, finally comes to Boston. On the other hand, Arthur Dimmesdale, who is an insouciant, healthy minister before his sin with Hester is punished, becomes paranoid, sickly, and isolated from the people of Boston as his guilt begins to overwhelm him. By neglecting to openly tell anyone about his sin with Hester, Dimmesdale isolates himself from the people.

He also isolates himself, this time from Hester, when he allows Chillingworth to move in with him to treat his illness. And he is isolated every time the people of Boston praise him as a marvelous preacher when he knows he is

not worthy of such veneration. Although Hester Prynne is a pulchritudinous, statuesque woman who is an active participant in the community, she begins a lonely life of solitude after she is punished for her crime of adultery. Forced to wear the letter A on her garments, Hester is isolated from the community of Boston. →→→The people in Boston see this letter as a sign of shame; therefore, they refuse to associate themselves with her. Gossiping about Hester, the townspeople say that Hester got off too easy with public humiliation as her only form of punishment. Since they live in a strict Puritan society obsessed with sin, they believe that Hester should've been killed for her crime even though there was a very likely chance that her husband was dead.

This resentment to Hester's crime leaves her all alone without any friends, her husband, or her lover. As Hawthorne writes, " Tomorrow would bring its own trial with it; so would the next day, and so would the next; each day its own trial, and yet the very same that was now so unutterably grievous to be borne... she would become the general symbol at which the preacher and moralist might point" (74-75), we see the endless cycle of isolation in Hester's future. Neither the austere Puritan citizens nor the hypocritical Puritan government officials are willing to forgive her and move on, so Hester has no one to turn to. Furthermore, Hester is isolated when she is forced to live on the outskirts of town in a desolate, abandoned cabin. Continuing her charitable works and her skills as a seamstress, Hester runs a small sewing business to support herself. Hester's skill as a seamstress can be seen when she steps onto the scaffold for the first time with the letter A on her dress that was " so artistically done, and with so much fertility and

gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel which she wore” (50). But when Hester goes into town to deliver her clothing, she is painfully reminded of how isolated she is from her community.

Even the children, who are too young to understand her situation, shun her when she comes into town. Yelling, “ Behold, verily there is the woman of the scarlet letter, and, of a truth, moreover, there is the likeness of the scarlet letter running along by her side! Come, therefore, and let us fling mud at them! ” (96), the children of the town show no common courtesy towards Hester. Ignoring her charitable acts and attempts to regain her acceptance in society, the townspeople prove to be unyielding, unforgiving hypocrites. Though Hester has sinned, it is still wrong for her community to treat her poorly and scorn her whenever she tries to go into town. These Puritans claim they are holy and following Christ, yet they fail to abide by the golden rule: treat others how you would like to be treated. And Hester is even more isolated, this time from Dimmesdale, when Chillingworth comes to Boston. Even though Chillingworth is her husband, they have never really loved each other, so this separation from Dimmesdale is far more difficult for Hester than her separation from her husband when she was sent to Boston alone.

After Hester affirms to Chillingworth that she will never tell him the name of her lover, he responds, “ Never, sayest thou? Never know him! Believe me Hester, there are few things hidden from the man who devotes himself earnestly and unreservedly to the solution of a mystery. I shall seek this man as I have sought truth in books, as I have sought truth in alchemy” (71-72).

Knowing that her husband will try to harm Dimmesdale if he finds out that he is the one whom Hester had an affair with, Hester isolates herself from Dimmesdale to protect him from Chillingworth. On the other hand, while Arthur Dimmesdale is a relaxed, hearty minister before Hester is punished for her crime, he becomes paranoid, ailing, and isolated from the people of Boston as his guilt begins to overpower him. The longer Dimmesdale conceals his guilt about his affair with Hester, the more erratic he becomes. Not wanting to confess, Dimmesdale torments his body to try to overcome his grief. Regularly holding vigils, whipping himself, and even carving an A onto his chest, Dimmesdale emotionally isolates himself.

Another example of Dimmesdale's insane behavior caused by guilt can be seen when he stands upon the scaffold alone one night. As Hawthorne writes, " And thus, while standing on the scaffold, in this vain show of expiation, Mr. Dimmesdale was overcome with a great horror of mind, as if the universe were gazing at a scarlet token on his naked breast, right over his heart" (139), we see the extent of the guilt Dimmesdale feels. By hiding his guilt from everyone, he has become overly suspicious and lunatic, but since he isolates himself, no one knows this. Also Dimmesdale is isolated from Hester when he falls ill and Chillingworth moves in to take care of him. Chillingworth promises to find the man whom Hester had relations with; furthermore, it is no surprise that he seeks to live with Dimmesdale since he is an influential, well-liked, and trusted man in Boston. A rumor " that Heaven had wrought an absolute miracle by transporting an eminent Doctor of Physic from a German university bodily through the air and setting him down at the door of Mr.

Dimmesdale's study" (114) took hold in Boston and although Dimmesdale tries to deny Chillingworth's aid, the town elders force him to allow Chillingworth to move in. Being constantly watched by Chillingworth, Dimmesdale cannot easily try to visit Hester since that would make Chillingworth very suspicious of him. Having to hide major secrets from someone living with him, Dimmesdale feels more alone than ever and increases his physical torments. As Dimmesdale's torturous attempts to cure his guilt prove to be ineffective, we see how much his guilt is eating away at him. He thinks that by physically hurting himself he can forget about his immense mental pain, but this only intensifies it. The more pain he feels the more distant he becomes from his community. On the same note, Chillingworth feels isolated when the people of Boston praise him as an amazing preacher.

As Dimmesdale feels guiltier and guiltier, his sermons regarding sin become more and more powerful. Calling himself a sinner, Dimmesdale tries to clandestinely admit to his guilt, but the people, who cannot believe that such a well-liked minister like Dimmesdale would be a sinner, interpret this as a metaphor. As he is praised for his inspirational sermons, he feels more and more isolated because he knows he is not worthy of such praise. Hawthorne sums up Dimmesdale's feelings by saying, " It is inconceivable, the agony with which this public veneration tortured him! (134); however, his preachments get even better the more this veneration tortures him. Hester and Dimmesdale prove how two people on opposite ends of the spectrum can both lead lives of isolation caused by sin. While Hester openly admits to her sin, Dimmesdale conceals his sin, which only harms him in the long run.

Even though Hester's reputation has been tainted and people see her in a whole new way, she is still true to herself unlike Dimmesdale, who puts forth the fake image of an honorable minister.

Puritan society condemns sinners, yet in this theocratic state, everyone hides their sins to protect their reputation; however, this is far worse than simply accepting the punishment and trying to gain your good reputation back through good works. By accepting her sin as part of whom she is, Hester proves herself to be the bigger person even though Dimmesdale is the minister because she accepts her sin leading to her physical isolation from the community and Dimmesdale while Dimmesdale keeps to himself which causes him both physical and mental pain which spiritually isolates him from his people.