

The scarlet letter essays

Literature, Russian Literature



Irish novelist Brian Moore observed, “ There comes a point in many people’s lives when they can no longer play the role they have chosen for themselves” (Bookshelf 95). From Hollywood movie stars to professional athletes, people have and will continue to lead false lives, under the public spotlight, concealing their personal travails. In literature, the preceding statement has held true numerous times, in works such as Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*.

Minister and respected citizen, Arthur Dimmesdale, was perceived as an upstanding member of the community who preached the word of the heavenly Father. But before the public, he was only camouflaging his dark, hidden secret, which was the sole cause of his sufferings. Hawthorne successfully portrayed the personal agonies one would suffer by cowardly holding secrets within oneself. In the *Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne set out to show the consequences of leading a double life. Arthur Dimmesdale, to the people of Boston, was a holy icon.

According to the public, “ never had a man spoken in so wise, so high, and so holy a spirit, as he... nor had inspiration ever breathed through mortal lips more evidently than it did through his” (167). Dimmesdale had risen through the ranks of the church and had the utmost respect of the people of Boston. Dimmesdale’s “ eloquence and religious fervor had already given the earnest of high eminence in his profession” (48). Hawthorne pointed out that Dimmesdale was a very influential and powerful speaker, whose soft spoken words, “ affected them [the townspeople] like the speech of an angel” (48). Dimmesdale also had the ability to preach unmatched sermons, containing messages that could touch souls. This was the case during a service

following his vigil when, “ Souls... were brought to the truth by the efficacy of that sermon, and vowed within themselves to cherish a holy gratitude towards Mr. Dimmesdale” (108). Hawthorne made Dimmesdale’s public character so morally, scholarly, and biblically flawless, that his hidden past literally killed him from the inside. Hawthorne used Dimmesdale’s secret passion with Hester to engineer his relentless downfall. Despite feelings of remorse for his sin, Dimmesdale’s internal fire could not be extinguished until he publicly confessed his sin. However, this process of publicly confessing his sin was a lengthy one indeed. Over that course of time, seven years to be exact, we observed the mental and physical decay of Arthur Dimmesdale. While standing on the scaffold Dimmesdale could feel the presence of a spirit gazing down upon him from the heavens, staring at his scarlet token, which lay upon his right, naked breast. Hawthorne noted that Dimmesdale had felt, “ On that spot, in very truth, there was, and there had long been, the gnawing and poisonous tooth of bodily pain” (102). To support Hawthorne, critic Seymour Gross stated, “ Dimmesdale must struggle to make himself a fit receptacle for God’s grace before his “ A” can be purged” (338). Dimmesdale himself gave us a glimpse into his personal sufferings, by asking the Lord to ease the hell in which he lived daily. He begged God for his help and forgiveness by staring skyward at the heavens and saying, “ O Thou to whom I dare not lift mine eyes, wilt Thou yet pardon me!” (137). Dimmesdale asked for God’s forgiveness for his sin, typical for a man of the cloth. Instead of publicly revealing his sin, as any man would do, Dimmesdale looked only to the heavens for help. By making this choice, Dimmesdale sealed his fate as one of ongoing personal pain. Hawthorne also

made use of symbolism to illustrate Dimmesdale's false qualities by using the scarlet "A." As Hester's sin was made clear to the public, Dimmesdale's half of the sin remained in the shadows. His "A" burned from within, causing him to constantly clench his hand over his heart, trying to extinguish an unquenchable fire. Hawthorne showed us once again that Dimmesdale's inability to come forward with his past was causing him to hurt not only on the inside, but also to experience physical pain. Dimmesdale said to Hester, "Happy are you, Hester, that you wear the scarlet letter openly on your bosom! Mine burns in secret!" (131) By saying this, Dimmesdale acknowledged to Hester that his internal fire could not be extinguished until everybody knew his dark secret. In addition, Hawthorne used Dimmesdale's relationship with his physician, Roger Chillingsworth, to further exemplify his personal pain. As Hester's husband, he was privy to Dimmesdale's dark secret, and was able to exact terrible anguish from the ailing minister as revenge for the sin he had committed with his wife. He was, "the secret poison of malignity, infecting the air about him" (131). Hawthorne described Chillingsworth as demonic throughout the novel. Hawthorne wrote, "that the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, like many other personages of special sanctity, in all ages of the Christian world, was haunted either by Satan himself, or Satan's emissary, in the guise of Roger Chillingsworth" (88). Chillingsworth was this diabolical agent, and had the satanic permission to burrow into the clergyman's very being, and plot against his soul. By not coming forward and revealing his secret, Dimmesdale subjected himself to the merciless treatment of his "friend" Chillingsworth, who psychologically and spiritually attacked the one who sinned with his wife. Now, we must ask

ourselves, why did Hawthorne doom Dimmesdale to this life of deep-rooted misery? He did this for two reasons. Firstly, he was trying to illustrate the pain felt by one who cowardly held within himself a secret that should have been be publicly confessed. This was exemplified through the aforementioned relationship between Dimmesdale and his physician.

Hawthorne's second reason was to show how no mortal man could live a double life: one known to the public, the other to only a few. Hawthorne stated, " No one man can wear one face to himself, and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the true" (146). In other words, a life of secrecy can not be lived with equanimity.

Dimmesdale tried this rather unsuccessfully, and it slowly but surely caused his public, as well as his personal, downfall. Critic Ernest Sandeen supported this statement by stating, " Before he can achieve this personal triumph, however, he must deal with the inner obstruction which blocks his way to repentance" (354). Thus we can see, and as Hawthorne has pointed out, public confession was the only means to extinguish his internal fire. Using Hawthorne's portrayal of the fictitious Dimmesdale, we can see real life applications of people who live " Dimmesdale type lives." A man who exemplified Dimmesdale type characteristics was the late, great Mickey Mantle. During the nineteen fifties and sixties, Mantle was the second coming of Babe Ruth. He could hit the ball as far as the eye could see, and through his efforts, brought numerous championships back to the Bronx. However, as was the case with Dimmesdale, looks were deceiving. Mantle's career and life were prematurely ended because of a dark secret: alcohol abuse. Just as Dimmesdale cowardly ignored the problems facing him, so to

did Mantle. Using drinking to escape reality, Mantle developed cirrhosis, which later claimed his life. This was just one of the many people who possessed “ Dimmesdalistic” qualities. As Hawthorne showed us, people can not live at peace with themselves if they continue to dodge life’s problems. Throughout the course of the novel, Hawthorne made clear the burden Dimmesdale had to carry upon his shoulders. Hawthorne made mention of the fact that, “ The only truth, that continued to give Mr. Dimesdale a real existence on this earth, was the anguish in his inmost soul and the undissembled expression of it in his aspect” (101). In addition to this statement by Hawthorne, critic Daniel G. Hoffman said, “ his isolation was so complete that none of these links with man, the devil, or God, can comfort him” (347). Hawthorne used Dimmesdale’s sufferings and moral cowardice to illustrate the consequences of leading the impossible double life. Hawthorne successfully showed us that having communal respect and popularity is insufficient for living in harmony with oneself. Unless one is willing to confront serious personal challenges directly and forthrightly, then one may be doomed to bear the burden that so tormented Arthur Dimmesdale.