

# Hypocrisy in "the scarlet letter"

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The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne is about the trials and tribulations of Hester Prynne, a woman living in colonial Boston. Found guilty of adultery, Hester's punishment is to wear a visible symbol of her sin: the scarlet letter "A." Through the book, the reader comes to know Hester, the adulteress; Dimmesdale, the holy man Hester had the affair with; and Chillingworth, the estranged husband of Hester who is out for revenge.

The Scarlet Letter examines the interaction of these characters and the reaction of these characters to Hester's sin. Although Hester's sin is at first supposed to be adultery, in fact adultery is just one of the many bases Hawthorne could use to build the story around. The underlying sin that Hawthorne deals with in The Scarlet Letter is hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is the practice of professing beliefs, feelings, or virtues that one does not hold or possess.

All three main characters, Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth, commit the sin of hypocrisy. Hawthorne shows that hypocrisy is indeed a sin by punishing the offenders. Hester Prynne is a strong, independent woman who deals with her sin of adultery very well. Instead of running away from it, she lives with it and accepts her punishment. However, while succumbing to the will of the court, she does not for an instant truly believe that she sinned. Hester thinks that she has not committed adultery because in her mind she wasn't really married to Chillingworth. Hester believes that marriage is only valid when there is love, and there is no love between Hester and Chillingworth. In the prison, defending her actions against him, she declares, "Thou knowest, thou knowest that I was frank with thee. I felt no love, nor feigned any" (74). Then, later, speaking to Dimmesdale, Hester further

imparts her belief that she has not sinned, saying, "What we did had a consecration of its own. We felt it so" (192). Therefore, Hester, in her mind, has not committed a sin. The fact that she accepts the courts decision so meekly and wears the scarlet letter denoting her as an adulteress is the first way in which she is hypocritical. Hester, although she does not believe she has sinned, portrays herself as a sinner by wearing the scarlet letter without complaint. Over the ensuing years, Hester endures the shame and ridicule brought about by the scarlet letter. However, the true source of the shame and ridicule is not adultery, but her own sin of hypocrisy. If Hester had not been hypocritical, if she had instead told the townspeople how she truly felt, then perhaps she would have earned their respect and not have forced to undergo the humiliation and punishment of the scarlet letter. Hester's acceptance of a false sin is not the only hypocritical act she carries out. Another way in which Hester is hypocritical is her agreement with Chillingworth to keep his name a secret. Hester, even though she claims to love Dimmesdale, agrees with Chillingworth to keep Chillingworth's name and mission secret (76). Hester is responsible for the pain that Chillingworth causes Dimmesdale, because she allows him to enter Dimmesdale's house without warning Dimmesdale. Arthur Dimmesdale, Hester's partner in adultery, is another character who is punished for his hypocrisy. Dimmesdale is a minister, one whom the people look up to for guidance and direction. The people consider him almost sinless, the perfect model which to follow. The townspeople thought of him as "a true priest, a true religionist, with the reverential sentiment largely developed, and an order of mind that impelled itself powerfully along the track of creed" (120). Believing himself to have

committed the grave sin of adultery, Dimmesdale's responsibility is to step down from his clerical position or at least admit his sin to the public. Instead, Dimmesdale hides his sin and actually uses Hester's sin in his sermons. A "true priest" would not hide his sin from his congregation, as Dimmesdale does. The fact that Dimmesdale hides his own sin while expounding on Hester's sin, which is actually the same, makes Dimmesdale a hypocrite. Dimmesdale is not only hypocritical to his congregation, but to Hester as well. Dimmesdale commits an act of adultery with Hester. He does so secure in the knowledge that he loved her, and she loved him. However, when it comes time to pay for their actions, Dimmesdale declines. Dimmesdale refuses to climb the scaffold with Hester to acknowledge the sin.

Dimmesdale, although professing his love for her, refuses to be associated with her. Hester explains this to Pearl, saying "[Dimmesdale] will be there, child. But he will not greet thee to-day" (224). Dimmesdale's refusal to be associated with Hester is cowardly, as is his refusal to climb the scaffold. It is hypocritical because he claims to love her, but he wants to keep that love secret. Roger Chillingworth, the husband of Hester Prynne, is the third character who commits the sin of hypocrisy. Chillingworth's hypocrisy is directed towards the practice of medicine. All doctors are supposed to care for their patients, according to the Hippocratic Oath. Chillingworth, a doctor, should adhere to this oath, but instead he breaks his vows and consciously uses his skill to hurt his patient, Dimmesdale. For Chillingworth, it is a matter of revenge, but that does not justify his betrayal of the vows which he took. Boasting to Hester, Chillingworth relates how he enjoyed torturing his patient (168). When Hester asks him if he hasn't tortured poor Dimmesdale enough,

Chillingworth responds, " No! no! He has but increased the debt!" (169). The fact that Chillingworth takes pleasure in his patient's discomfort while at the same time claiming to be a physician of the highest caliber makes Chillingworth a hypocrite. He is punished by Hawthorne for his hypocrisy. Hawthorne makes Chillingworth deformed, both physically and mentally. Chillingworth has been gnarled with age, but his mental condition is worse. He has turned into a man bent on revenge, with no regard for anything except sating his thirst for revenge. Chillingworth proceeds to lay blame of his own present deformities on Dimmesdale. According to Chillingworth, it is Dimmesdale's fault that he, Chillingworth, is a " fiend." Aside from being hypocritical towards his medicine, Chillingworth is hypocritical regarding Hester as well. Chillingworth admits to Hester that he is to blame for their poor marriage. He says, It was my folly!. The world had been so cheerless! My heart was a habitation large enough for many guests, but lonely and chill, and without a household fire. I longed to kindle one!. And so, Hester, I drew thee into my heart, into its innermost chamber, and sought to warm thee by the warmth which thy presence made there! (74). Chillingworth goes on to admit that he has no desire for vengeance against Hester: " I seek no vengeance, plot no evil against thee. Between thee and me, the scale hangs fairly balanced" (74). Later on, Chillingworth shows that he was lying when he says " I have left thee to the scarlet letter. If that have not avenged me, I can do no more!" (169). Chillingworth, despite what he said earlier, had been avenging himself not only on Dimmesdale, but on Hester as well, demonstrating again the lying, hypocritical ways he practices. Through the punishment of the three main characters, Hester, Dimmesdale, and

Chillingworth, Hawthorne clearly shows that hypocrisy is a sin meriting terrible punishment. The sin of adultery, for which Hester is branded, is not the true sin in *The Scarlet Letter*. Rather, it is just one possible sin that can lead the sinner and those involved into the treacherous depths of hypocrisy, the true sin of *The Scarlet Letter*.