

# Characters appearances in the scarlet letter: how they change and why

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The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne was written in the 1800s but takes place in the 1600s; it is a fictional story that exemplifies the power of sin and shame in Puritan society, where daily life revolved around work and religion. Hester Prynne, a woman who has committed adultery with a minister, has a child, Pearl, who is considered eccentric and witchlike. As punishment for the crime, the town officials decide to make her wear a scarlet letter A on her chest, instead of executing her.

She endures all the shame by herself because she gave birth to Pearl and there is proof of her crime. In the meantime, Hesters husband, as well as Pearls father, choose not to reveal their connections with Hesters crime. The story contrasts Hesters emotional healing process with those of Arthur Dimmesdale, the minister who fathered Pearl, and Roger Chillingworth, Hesters husband who remains anonymous to everyone except Hester. Throughout the story, signs of Dimmesdales and Chillingworths mental and physical deterioration begin to show. Nathaniel Hawthorne uses descriptive imagery of characters appearances and physical conditions to express that exposing sin or wrongdoings, however difficult, puts us in a better state of mind because we have nothing to hide.

Hester Prynne is the first person we meet in the story who has sinned badly. The town officials force her to stand on a platform for several hours in front of the townspeople. No one has any doubt that she has committed adultery because she is holding Pearl. As she walks forth from the prison door, she maintains perfect elegance on a large scale and her beauty makes a halo of the misfortune and ignominy in which she [is] enveloped (Hawthorne 55-6).

Having already revealed her sin to the world, whether she wanted to or not, Hester is in a near-perfect state of mind even in the midst of her shame in the community. She feels no guilt for what she has done, and she even takes pride in the scarlet letter she has been forced to make and wear. While Hesters scarlet letter does take a toll on her emotions, her conscience is certainly cleaner than several other characters in the book who keep their sins secret. The fact that she has owned up to her sin and is not hiding it or letting it gnaw away at a guilty conscience has freed her emotionally, and this liberty from guilt manifests itself physically, in her elegance. Hawthorne uses imagery to describe her as free from the guilt she would have to endure if she had the choice not to reveal her sin and chose not to publicize it.

On the other hand, Arthur Dimmesdale, Pearls father, who is a young, well-respected minister in the community, is in a position to keep his sin quiet—he also has that option because he is male and is not the partner who has the child. Dimmesdales transformation throughout the story is remarkable. He remains stable at the beginning, but by the end of the book, he has been destroyed by his guilt. He does reveal his sin at last in front of the shocked townspeople, but he dies immediately afterward. He also maintains a relationship with Roger Chillingworth, who is Hesters husband, but he does not realize this for a long time. Chillingworth, who is a physician, gains Dimmesdales trust gradually and then uses it to his own advantage to emotionally torture him as revenge for committing adultery with Hester. Although Dimmesdale often refuses help and medicine from others in the community, every successive Sabbath, his cheek [becomes] paler and

thinner, and his voice more tremulous than before (Hawthorne 125). When Hester meets with Dimmesdale, she notices his poor condition: [h]is nerve seemed absolutely destroyed (Hawthorne 165). Although he did commit adultery just as Hester did, and he also got away with it and left Hester to endure the shame alone, he cannot help but feel progressively guiltier. Some of his guilt is only natural, but most of it comes from Roger Chillingworth, who is set on destroying him emotionally. Just as with Hester, Hawthorne allows Dimmesdales state of mind to manifest itself physically and weaken the minister until he dies. Hesters relative wellness contrasted with Dimmesdales deteriorating health communicate that expressing and owning sin openly is important for maintaining a balanced state of mind.

One other key character in the story shows a striking physical transformation: Roger Chillingworth. Chillingworth is perhaps the most evil character in the story because he manipulates Dimmesdales conscience to the point of emotional torture. Hester provides perspective for his transformation. She best remembers him as a studious man with a calm temperament, and he now shows mans ability of transforming into a devil (Hawthorne 176-177). His idea of fun has become torturing Dimmesdale, and every day he falls deeper and deeper into a pit of sin that no one knows about except Dimmesdale and Hester, when they finally realize together what he has been doing. As with Hester and Dimmesdale, Chillingworths physical condition corresponds with his internal emotional state. However, Dimmesdale sins once, while Chillingworth sins continually and feels no

remorse for it either. Chillingworths haggard appearance represents this additional level of sin well, as it eats away at him gradually.

In conclusion, taking note of the physical transformations of the characters in *The Scarlet Letter* is key to understanding how relieving it is to disclose our sins. Hawthorne frequently uses descriptive imagery of Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth to convey this idea. It is important to note that Hester, unlike Dimmesdale and Chillingworth, had no choice but to reveal the fact that she committed adultery; she had Pearl, and she did not have any opportunity available to hide her sin. Nevertheless, enduring shame from others in her community benefited her in the long run, and it hurt the other two individuals in the situation who did not experience any public humiliation, but instead kept their sins private. Chillingworth remained quiet because he did not want anyone to find out he was Hesters husband. Dimmesdale, being the target of Dimmesdales sin, remained silent about his act of adultery because his reputation as a minister was at risk. Hawthornes use of imagery does not only express the importance of revealing sin, but also raises questions about whether Hester would have been happier if the adultery had not resulted in Pearl, but she had chosen to reveal her sin anyway, as Dimmesdale does in some regard. The principles in this book do not just apply to sin; they can extend to dishonesty in general in todays less religion-centric life. Hawthorne encourages us to be forward about our dishonesty because it will enable us to live with more peace of mind.