

# Wakefield and chillingsworth: hawthorne's subtle abusers

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



Wakefield and Chillingsworth: Hawthorne's Subtle Abusers In his short story "Wakefield", author Nathaniel Hawthorne represents the perverse and abusive inclinations of man at their most random. As a man of no individual value, Wakefield lives a generally insignificant existence, with neither character nor actions to his merit or discredit. Wakefield's decision to suddenly leave his wife, only to spend decades observing her from close proximity, does not have any catalyst, nor does it correspond with any profound intellectual or creative intentions he may have harbored.

Wakefield's haphazard resolution to completely disappear from his wife's life (to her knowledge) is wholly purposeless: he not only has no reason for doing this, but he develops no objectives or even any conclusion to his scheme.

The fact that Wakefield did possess enough resolve—however unfounded—to continue the psychological abuse of his wife for years upon end does, however, signify a buried dissatisfaction with his marital life. Therefore, while Wakefield lacks the same motivation for torturing his victim that

Chillingsworth possesses in *The Scarlet Letter*, both characters demonstrate uneasiness with their relationships that manifests itself in their unconventional actions. Although Wakefield's cruelty toward his wife is obscene in its very pointlessness, his methods of carrying out this abuse relate fundamentally to Chillingsworth's torture of Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter*, indicating similarities among their attitudes toward their victims and their associations with them. In both stories, each character attains a certain, personal degree of individuality by daring to carry out actions that contradict the paradigms of his society. Both Chillingsworth and Wakefield exploit their victims under the disguise of an everyday, unremarkable citizen, thereby

living comfortably and secretly as hypocrites: " We must hurry after (Wakefield) along the street, ere he lose his individuality, and melt into the great mass of London life" (922.) However, with the knowledge that their personal actions have such strong influence on their victims, both Chillingsworth and Wakefield develop enough confidence in their power to continue their manipulation to a greater extent. It is their self-assurance in their abilities to destroy lives so subtly and unsuspectingly that fuels their slowly-wielded torture. In this way, Chillingsworth and Wakefield feed off the agony of their respective victims in continuing to disrupt their modest lives: by shielding themselves from the villainous profile by either vanishing (Wakefield) or assuming the role of confidante (Chillingsworth), each character can inflict pain without risking his dominance over his victim. Chillingsworth and Wakefield both, moreover, gain strength as their schemes progress without deliberate plan, and specifically receive a dose of willpower in a single defining moment: Wakefield after he first forbids himself from returning to his home, and Chillingsworth when he discovers the letter " A" Dimmesdale scarred to his chest. Wakefield has no plans to fully abandon his wife (or any plan, for that matter), yet after he initially discovers his ability to neglect his proper duty as husband of returning home to her, he becomes imbued with strange, dominating potency: " Habit- for he is a man of habits- takes him by the hand, and guides him, wholly unaware, to his own door, where, just at the critical moment, he is aroused by the scraping of his foot upon the step...At that instant his fate was turning on the pivot...In Wakefield, the magic of a single night has wrought a similar transformation, because, in that brief period, a great moral change has been effected" (923.)

Similarly, when Chillingworth observes the letter “ A” Dimmesdale presumably engraved on his own chest, he realizes with full clarity the extent of his abuse and his potential to wreak more havoc on his victim’s fragile mentality. Thus, the numerous parallels between Chillingworth’s and Wakefield’s manipulation methodologies signify certain correlations between their respective relations to their victims, since both felt the need to torture their victims in similar fashions. Chillingworth was clearly motivated to psychologically torment Dimmesdale by revenge, blaming him for the destruction of his own marriage and reputation, yet he sought to retaliate in a subtle way in order to render Dimmesdale completely helpless in his innocence. Wakefield wholly lacks reasonable or even comprehensible purpose for manipulating his wife, yet the fact that he decided to do so indicates his unhappiness with her. In the same way that Chillingworth felt compelled to cause pain to Dimmesdale for disrupting the conventional, married life he had accepted, Wakefield must feel somewhat dissatisfied with his marital life and therefore seeks a scapegoat. To add a certain degree of uniqueness to his existence, he removes himself from his traditional lifestyle, and watches with perverse interest the adverse effects of his doing so. While Wakefield and Chillingworth don’t act with the same intentions, they act with the same primary discontentment at heart that fuels their desire to make changes—however seemingly arbitrary—to their lives.