

Scarlet letter:bewilderment at essay



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Jane Manwelyan "Bewilderment at the Hands of Sin" No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself and another to the multitude without finally becoming bewildered as to which may be true. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, this quote applies to the two main characters of the novel. It applies to Arthur Dimmesdale in a literal way; he clearly is not the man that he appears to be, and the guilt that goes along with such deception consumes him and, in the end, is the cause for his demise. The quote also applies to Hester Prynne, but in quite a different way. It was not her choice to wear the face that she was forced to wear, but the scarlet letter on her bosom determined how people saw her and, in turn, how she was expected to feel about herself. At first, however, Hester did not consider the sin which she committed as blasphemous and horrible as the people of Boston did, but she was forced to wear the face of an evil doer. For both Hester and Arthur, it was true that they could not live their lives concealing their true emotions. Arthur literally could not live with it, while Hester changed the way she felt on the inside to correspond to her guilty image.

At the court house, when Arthur Dimmesdale was pleading for Hester to reveal the name of the man with whom she had an affair, it was clear that a part of him actually wanted everyone to know that it was he who was the guilty one. "Be not silent from any mistaken pity and tenderness for him; for, believe me, Hester, though he were to step down from a high place... better were it so, than to hide a guilty heart through life," (47). When this plea is made, it at first glance appears to be quite ironic. The actual man who committed the crime is trying to convince his accomplice to do him in.

However, this statement shows that Arthur was not simply a confused man; it was much more extreme than that. He was “bewildered to the point where a part of him really wanted Hester to let the whole town know that it was he who was the guilty one. Whether he meant to or not, Arthur did sound extremely convincing in his speech, which makes the reader understand that he was being pulled in two completely opposite directions. A part of him wanted more than anything to have the weight of this secret sin lifted from his conscience; another part of him, arguably the practical part, knew that he could never let the people know the truth. His facade and image were much too important not only to him, but to the entire community. If he had admitted to everyone what he had done, then he would have been seen, not only as a hypocrite, but a betrayer of everyone’s trust. Some people in the community might have even started doubting the religion because, if this man who they considered holy and righteous, could not live a sin free life, then how could they? Clearly, Arthur was asking these questions as well, and the world in which he had lived in and had served so faithfully in was beginning to close in on him. It was because of this that his health began to fail and his body could, at the end, no longer handle the weight and sadness of his soul. His spirit had been lost long before his body gave out. Both Hester and Arthur struggled with the question of whether or not what they had done was a true sin and whether or not there was utter truth in the words and ideologies of the town’s people. The two of them did not simply sleep together out of lust and recklessness; they were truly in love and, at the time, they both believed that what they did “had a consecration of its own”(134). This meant that there was an aspect of holiness in what they did; it was something pure and even sacred to them at the time. Whether they

were truly in love, or whether it was passion, or a combination of the two, both Arthur and Hester were faced with the question of whether what they did was truly a sin. They had to ask themselves an extremely difficult question and what the people of Boston thought was irrelevant to the question, because they were dealing with the way that God felt and looked upon their supposed “consecration” and, perhaps even more importantly, how they felt about what they had done. Both Arthur and Hester decided that they had committed a true sin and that it was, as all sins are, wrong. Arthur was so miserable and felt so torn and guilty that there was no way for him to believe that what they had done had any elements of purity and goodness. He felt “nothing but despair”(131), he was “most miserable”(131), and he knew that they would receive their punishments on judgement day by the only one true judge: God. Arthur was torn because he could not live with the weight of the secret sin, but he could not imagine making it public. It was because of this, that his health began to deteriorate and his spirit was losing all of its strength and character. “His form grew emaciated; his voice...had a certain melancholy prophecy of decay in it,”(82) which meant that it became clear that he was not on his way to recovery but, vice versa, on his way to death and “decay”. Hester lost her spirit as well, but she dealt with the in a completely different way.

Instead of completely giving up all hope, Hester decided that the people of Boston were right in labelling her and placing the “A” on her. She did not, at first, think that what her and Arthur did was evil. In fact, she labels their act as having been holy and completely unprofane. However, at some point in her life, she decided that what they did in fact was a sin. She did not start

seeing herself as a bad person, and neither did the townspeople because they eventually took the “ A” on her chest to stand for “ Able”. What she did do was give up her dreams and goals of leading a revolution to make people see women and the world in a new way. When she internalized what the “ A” had stood for throughout all of those years, and what the townspeople truly thought of her and especially of what she had done, she abandoned her hopes for influencing the way others thought and realized the “ impossibility that any mission of divine and mysterious truth should be confided to a woman stained with sin, or bowed down with shame,”(180). Hester admitted to having committed a true sin and, therefore, being filled with shame and remorse for what she and Arthur had done.

For both Arthur and Hester, there is a struggle with their identities. Arthur was not able to handle the guilt and shame that went along with his secret. He became so torn and bewildered, that his health began to deteriorate and he, eventually died because he could not bare the sadness of his life. Hester dealt with the sin in a completely different way not only because she was a different person, but because there was no additional weight of a secret that went along with the sin. Instead of trying to figure out her identity, the way Arthur had, and clinging onto the belief that what she had done was not a sin, she allowed herself to surrender and believe what the rest of society believed at that time. The people of Boston saw adultery as a sin, and there was no way that any good or love could come out of it. When Arthur’s character is tested, he struggles to find the answer but is unable to, and literally dies trying. Hester, on the other hand, does not give such a noble

attempt, but rather chooses, whether consciously or not, to go along with the mainstream views of adultery.