

Scarlet letter symbolism of darkness

Literature



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Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is full of symbolism and imagery. One could find a symbol that is relayed throughout the book on every page. To be able to identify and recognize these more subtle symbols, there is a symbol that must be recognized first. Darkness is a recurring theme in this novel that represents secrets, sins, and the nature of one's soul, but often times darkness is used in terms of shadow and gloom. Three characters show similar, yet completely different, ways that Hawthorne uses Darkness to connect with the reader.

Hester, who is the image of darkness to the townspeople. She eventually accepts her sin, yet she is always under the judgemental eyes of the townspeople who will never let her be seen as anything but an abomination. Dimmesdale, who lives in the darkness. He is the father of Pearl, and no one knows this. So he lives his life in a lie, keeping his dark secret buried deep inside him until it eventually kills him. And Chillingworth, who is the literal embodiment of the darkness.

Roger Chillingworth, Hester's husband, is consumed with revenge on the father of Pearl, and he lets his soul get consumed by the darkness of his rage. Multiple other accounts of darkness and shadows can be found in the text in relation to Pearl and her ever-growing nature, as well as Mistress Hibbins, the self-proclaimed witch of the novel. At the very beginning, even before the first chapter, we get into the meaning of this symbol and later find out how during the introduction, Hawthorne is preparing us for what the symbol stands for.

‘ What is he? ’ murmurs one gray shadow of my fore-fathers to the other” (Hawthorne 13). Hawthorne had decided to be a writer back in times when it was not acceptable, or that being a writer was not considered a job, and he felt as if his ancestors were attached to him. They never left his side and he always held the weight of disappointment -- that they would have had if they were there to see him -- on his shoulders.

He can never escape these judgements, because they follow him around. This is the same situation that Hester is in. Hester can never escape “ the spot where some great and marked event has given the color to their lifetime; and still the more irresistibly, the darker the tinge that saddens it” (Hawthorne 93), because even if she chose to escape and leave town, her sin would keep her to this town where she had committed her great sin in the first place.

Even though this town has given her life color, -- her affair with Dimmesdale was a great, exciting thing that had been brought into her life, -- it had turned from being vibrant to being dull, because the townspeople caught on and turned this relationship which made her happy, into something that brought her pain every day. Hawthorne uses Hester to show judgement of people and how they are willing to expose other’s wrongdoings, and make one’s life duller, yet are not willing to expose their own.

A cottage that once drew no attention from the townspeople has been turned into a “ mystic shadow of suspicion” (Hawthorne 95), just due to the fact that Hester now lives there. She has let the townspeople into letting her believe that she is nothing more than sin. She even comes to believe that

during her labor with Pearl, her “ deep stains of crimson and gold, the fiery lustre, the black shadow and the untempered light” (Hawthorne 105) had been passed along to her child and she expects to “ detect some dark and wild peculiarity” (104) in which Pearl had received from her “ sinful” act.

Not only have they convinced her that she is just sin, but they also show her that too. Although, as she is walking back into the prison from the scaffold “ it was whispered, by those who peered after her, that the scarlet letter threw a lurid gleam along the dark passage-way of the interior” (Hawthorne 80).

The townspeople give the impression that through the scarlet letter, Hester can redeem herself and possibly be seen in the light again, because the letter is leading the way for her. But this is not true, because throughout the whole book she is pushed into the shadows and the people never allow her to be seen in the light.

She is used “ not as a guest, but as a rightful inmate, into the household that was darkened by trouble” (191). Hester is able to console people who have sinned because these people who have sinned are scared of her fate, and they do not want the other people of the town to know. But, “ when sunshine came again, she was not there. Her shadow had faded across the threshold” (Hawthorne 192). In this sentence Hawthorne uses the sunshine, -- which is another symbol, -- as a way of contrasting to the dark, yet he still manages to leave Hester out.

As the people started to feel better about what they had done, they just go back to themselves, and Hester leaves, only to be judged just as harshly by the same people. When it comes to Dimmesdale, Hawthorne portrays him in

terms of this symbol as an old dog that chooses to fall “ asleep in the sunshine or in the shade” (48). In Dimmesdale’s case specifically, he chooses the shade. The first time we meet Dimmesdale, Hawthorne brings this up about him, and how “ he trod in the shadowy by-paths” (77).

Dimmesdale is a minister who is greatly worshipped for his strong, angelic voice, and has a good following of parishioners. Little do they know of his secret which he holds so deeply in his heart, that it soon begins to affect his physical health. Dimmesdale seems to want to tell his secret throughout the story but he believes ““ these revelations, [. . .], are meant merely to promote the intellectual satisfaction of all intelligent beings, who will stand waiting, on that day, to see the dark problem of this life made plain. ”” (Hawthorne 156).

Although “ more than once, he had cleared his throat and drawn in the long, deep, tremulous breath, which, when sent forth again, would come burdened with the black secret of his soul” (Hawthorne 170), he believes that his sinful secret is to only be judged by God on judgement day. That revealing his secret before then, would just be to satisfy the people of the town as to who Pearl’s father is. Not only does he keep his secret hidden, he tortures himself over it, and this is the start of a cycle. When he tortures himself, his sermons become great.

While his sermons keep getting better, his “ popularity in his sacred office” (Hawthorne 167) becomes greater, and as his popularity rises, the more guilt he feels over his secret and he tortures himself more. During one of his vigils,-- a form of his torture, -- he seems to get this “ amazing” idea as to

how to relieve his guilt. He decides to live his guilt out in the middle of the night on “ the same platform or scaffold, black and weather-stained with the storm or sunshine of seven long years” (Hawthorne 175).

This scaffold is the same one that Hester Prynne had stood on at the very beginning of the book, only this time it is Dimmesdale who is standing on it, and it is the middle of the book. On the way to the platform, Hawthorne states, “ walking in the shadow of a dream, as it were, and perhaps actually under the influence of a species of somnambulism, Mr. Dimmesdale reached the spot that, now so long since, Hester Prynne had lived through her first hours of public ignominy” (Hawthorne 175). In this context Hawthorne uses a literal and figurative meaning of this quote. Dimmesdale is walking in a literal dream.

He reaches the scaffold and starts to see the townspeople come out, and Hester and Pearl join him on the scaffold, which they never do. It is a dream that he deems as something he can't do, because than he would be revealing his secret to the town and he does not want to do that in the slightest. The figurative is the opposite. This dream that he has to walk in the shadow of, is the dream of his secret being revealed. That he does not have to lie, but he does not want to risk it so he stays in the shadows where this secret is attached to him and he lives this lie.

He can not come out of the shadows, until the sun changes positions, or rather the people can see him in a new light. One that shows a different side of him, which would be the truth. Now when it comes to Roger Chillingworth, he is the darkness of this story. He makes everything that is bad even worse,

because he is so consumed in revenge on the man Hester committed her sin with. The first real introduction we get to Chillingworth and his intentions is when he visits Hester in the jail, after her shaming on the scaffold.

Hawthorne uses Roger Chillingworth's "dark and self-relying intelligen[t]" (Hawthorne 87) smile to create a factor of pure evil. This smile of Chillingworth's haunts Hester multiple times throughout the story as she sees his whole demeanor change, "how his dark complexion seemed to have grown duskier, and his figure more misshapen" (Hawthorne 132). How Hawthorne describes Chillingworth at the governor's house here makes the reader envision how much he has let himself go. Chillingworth does not care about his looks anymore, or himself at all for that matter.

He lets himself fall into the hands of evil by dedicating the rest of his life to causing the father of Pearl pain and torture. So thus he begins his investigation on Dimmesdale. Since he has Dimmesdale's trust in the first place he spends his time searching and studying Dimmesdale "like a treasure-seeker in a dark cavern" (146). He is going to dangerous depths to try and find this secret which he knows the minister holds, so much so that he could lose it all with one mistake, just as a treasure-seeker could.

During Dimmesdale's vigil he sees Chillingworth with an evil expression on his face. So vivid was the expression, or so intense the minister's perception of it, that it seemed still to remain painted on the darkness, after the meteor had vanished, with an effect as if the street and all things else were at once annihilated" (Hawthorne 186). The idea that Hawthorne is trying to pass here, is that Chillingworth has become the full face of evil of this point. Even

though he is in the complete darkness and shadows, one can still see his expressions of evil, due to the fact that the darkness is one and the same as himself.

When Hester goes to talk to Chillingworth about revealing him as her husband to Dimmesdale, Hawthorne uses this as an opportunity for Hester to truly see what he has become. “ It seemed to be his [Chillingworth’s] wish and purpose to mask this expression with a smile; but the latter played him false, and flickered over his visage so derisively, that the spectator could see his blackness all the better for it” (Hawthorne 203). Chillingworth knows that he is a “ fiend at [Dimmesdale’s] elbow” (Hawthorne 205) and he tries to hide it.

He is not proud of what he has become, yet he can not help but let himself become it. We can tell this from how when he talks “ his manner lost its fiercer characteristics, and subsided into gloom” (Hawthorne 206). This is one of the only times that Hawthorne uses this symbol in terms of sadness in Chillingworth. He is still human, and he still has feelings, but he has lost himself in the darkness which his soul has become, and he knows he can not go back from it. The Forest is a completely different environment for Hester, because this is where she stands out and she can feel comfortable.

The Forest is described as “ black and dense,” but for Hester it “ disclosed such imperfect glimpses of the sky above, that, to [her] mind, it imaged not amiss the moral wilderness in which she had so long been wandering” (Hawthorne 220). Hester’s mind has been a black full of dark thoughts about herself and it was so filled that she never knew what to think about next, and

now she is in the forest, which is the real-life personification of her mind. Hawthorne even uses Pearl as an example that Hester is only miserable in the town.

Hawthorne compares Pearl to the brook, that she “resembled the brook, inasmuch as the current of her life gushed from a well-spring as mysterious, and had flowed through scenes shadowed as heavily with gloom” (Hawthorne 224). Simply meaning that Pearl had been through misery due to her mother, but she then refuses to let the stream kill her enjoyment of nature. When Dimmesdale appears in the forest, he does not, at first, recognize Hester, but once he does “they glided back into the shadow of the woods” (Hawthorne 228).

Hawthorne’s use of the word “glided” makes the reader get a sense that it was easy for them to back into the shadow together, that it was right, and it was because they were comfortable being alone with their sin. When they were together, their sin does not seem as bad as it does where there is no shadow to accept it. Even after Hester admits to who Chillingworth truly is, they relish in knowing that they have each other, and they have Pearl, and it seemed to them that “no golden light had ever been so precious as the gloom of this dark forest” (Hawthorne 235).

The forest has become a place for Hester and Dimmesdale to be themselves, and even in the darkness that this forest brings, they experience the best moment of truth to each other. Hawthorne has a way of using these symbols in various ways, and through various people in *The Scarlet Letter*, but he does this, so that the reader can grasp an understanding for the powerful,

various meanings of these symbols. Shadows and darkness is one of the symbols he uses more than the others, and he associates it a lot of the time with its opposite, light and sunshine.

Only so the reader can comprehend that light is what the townspeople consider good, and, in a sense, Hester considers bad. As well as up until the forest, shadows and darkness is seen as a very negative symbol.

Representing sinister intentions, sin, and secret, Hawthorne does not want the reader to see much good from the darkness. And then this darkness finally becomes its own light, through the forest, which is the darkest place in the story. Yet, it provides the safest place for Hester, Dimmesdale, as well as Pearl, who finds her happiness in the wilderness and spontaneity of Nature itself.