

Scarlet letter: dimmesdale's suffering 1680

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In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet*

Letter, Dimmesdale, experiences the most emotional suffering from the weight of guilt placed upon him as the father of an illegitimate child. His lover, Hester Prynne bears their child and is chastised and exiled from her peers. The identity of the father is kept secret, so the community respects Dimmesdale as a member of the Doctrine of the Elect. Dimmesdale is considered a role model for other Puritans of Boston. Dimmesdale suffers the most because of the pressure of being a role model for the community, so he cannot tell anyone, and he puts himself in physical and emotional turmoil because of this.

Being a role model makes it harder for Dimmesdale to live his life. As a parishioner, Dimmesdale's every word is considered important. " They deemed the young clergyman a miracle of holiness. They fancied him the mouthpiece of Heaven's message of wisdom, and rebuke, and love" (131). This shows that he was widely respected which made it harder to confess. At times he wanted to bear the

black secret of his soul, but he could not because of the respect he had over people. Hester did not have to suffer this way. Her secret was out in the open. It is proven when Dimmesdale dies on the scaffold how he was respected. Some of his fellow parishioners do not believe that there was an "A" on his chest.

Dimmesdale cannot tell anyone about his secret, because of Chillingworth's vengeance, talking to Hester makes him fearful of being suspected. Once again the suffering Chillingworth experiences is nothing compared to Dimmesdale. Chillingworth is also concealing a deep secret, but he does not face any consequences if he confesses. Hester does not have any more secrets. Chillingworth, whom Dimmesdale is living with, is very vengeful. There is even reference to Chillingworth being like the devil. In the prison when Chillingworth treats the infant Pearl, Hester asks if he will prey upon her soul now that he is in Boston. Chillingworth replies "'Not thy soul'" (72). This means that he is going to take vengeance on the father. Chillingworth explains that he is ruthless, "(F)ew things hidden from

the man who devotes himself earnestly and unreservedly to the solution of a mystery" (70). This shows that Chillingworth is determined to make Dimmesdale suffer, and magnifies Dimmesdale's suffering.

Dimmesdale suffers emotionally and physically, because he is alone and a role model. He physically damages himself by etching the A into his flesh. As well, it is shown that he is emotionally deteriorating. The night he went to the scaffold Dimmesdale thought he had a whole conversation that did not really happen. After thinking Dimmesdale spoke he thought to himself, " Good heavens had Mr. Dimmesdale actually spoken? For one instant he believed that these words had passed his lips... they were uttered in his imagination" (138). This shows that Dimmesdale is not in the right mind, and he is having trouble establishing reality from his imagination. Physically it has been noted that Dimmesdale might have been whipping himself. " In Mr. Dimmesdale's secret closet... there was a bloody scourge.... this (man) had piled it on his own

shoulders" (133). Later it also alludes to how he starved himself, out of guilt. Although Hester suffers from loneliness, she still is allowed to know her daughter, while Dimmesdale fears his own child. Chillingworth deteriorates, because he thrives on Dimmesdale falling health.

Dimmesdale suffers the most in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. He is ashamed to admit his sins to a parish that respects him greatly, and because of this he is alone. It has deteriorated his mind and his thoughts. Suffering is a universal trait. All of us feel pain, emotional and physical, at some point in our lives. The barrier between human and animal or woman or man is unseen by the lurking shadow of suffering. Like the dogs whose lives are mercilessly taken during a weekend pastime, or by a speeding car they suffer just as much as one who is mourning a death or their own inner exile.