

# Shedding light on sin

[Business](#)



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Secrets, by nature, are heavy. They weigh on their keeper's mind and heart, especially when they are dark.

When hiding a secret, one is plagued with the dichotomous question: conceal or reveal? In Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter*, two sinners must grapple with the consequences of their transgressions, and determine if it is preferable to mask a sin or expose it to society. The consequences of this choice are revealed through the novel's figurative usage of daylight and darkness: each symbol has a double meaning, which reveals that sinning is a complicated, nuanced issue. Hawthorne's uses of the double meanings of sunlight and shadow represent the complexity of sinning: masking a sin does protect one from society's judgement, but ultimately hinders a sinner from achieving freedom from their wrongdoing. Hiding a transgression spares a sinner from harsh public ignominy. In this novel, the minister Dimmesdale's apartment has "heavy window curtains to create a noontide shadow when desirable," so he can allow his sin to remain secret and shaded (Hawthorne 124).

Curtains function to block the sun from penetrating a room, and these curtains create a darkness that shields the minister's sin from society's judgement. Hawthorne juxtaposes the words "noontide" and "shadow" to symbolize the dichotomy of hiding sin. At noon, the sun is brightest and will illuminate all shade, just as society will uncover and scrutinize sin.

Dimmesdale's curtains block out this intense sun and allow shadows to form, thus concealing his wrongdoing. This is not the only time that Dimmesdale obscures his sin: when he is at Governor Bellingham's mansion, he stands "with his face partially concealed in the heavy folds of the window-curtain"

(Hawthorne 115). As the minister hides his face in shadow, he is symbolically masking his misdeed, and is therefore spared from the stern judgement that accompanies confession of a sin.

The fact that he is doing this in a public setting, while surrounded by men of moral prestige, further reinforces how darkness is allowing him to veil his iniquity amongst members of this community. Additionally, as described in Leo B. Levy's literary criticism, "The Landscape Modes of The Scarlet Letter," Dimmesdale's midnight scaffold vigil takes place in a "totality of darkness" (Levy 386). Shrouded in gloom, Dimmesdale can secretly atone for his sin, and the night spares him from sunlight and public shame. During his vigil, if the townspeople were to come outside, "they would have discerned no face [..

.] in the dark gray of the midnight" (Hawthorne 143). Dimmesdale cannot be perceived in the dim nighttime, just as his sin cannot be seen in the shadowy secret he shrouds it in. This reflects how when a wrongdoing is veiled in obscure darkness, a sinner is saved from public humiliation. The dark shadow that shelters a sinner from public shame conversely makes it difficult for society to see past a sinner's transgression and appreciate his or her other qualities. Hawthorne describes the adulteress Hester Prynne as indistinguishable from "a woman or a shadow" (Hawthorne 181).

Just as shadows dim whatever they fall upon, Hester's sin obscures her other qualities. It is difficult for society to see through the gloom of her misdeed and determine if she, as a sinner, is a woman—or something else. A shadow, which Hester is thought to be, is associated with indistinctness and

intangibility. The connotations of Hawthorne's word choice reflect the consequences of hiding sin: society cannot see through the obscure dimness of wrongdoing to acknowledge the many other qualities of a sinner. This idea is further explored when Hester is at Governor Bellingham's mansion. As Hester stands beside the group of magistrates, "the shadow of the [window's] curtain fell on [her...] and partially concealed her" (Hawthorne 109).

This physical shading reinforces the idea that a transgression dims and hides a sinner's true nature. Hawthorne's use of the word "concealed" shows how Hester's true character is veiled by her wrongdoing, just as her true form can't be seen through the curtain's shadow. This shadow came from a curtain, which serves the function of blocking light from entering a room. Hester's sin darkens her and goodness cannot reach her, just as a curtain dims a room and light cannot shine into it. This reflects how the darkness of sin overshadows a sinner's other qualities, and makes it difficult for society to appreciate one's true character.

Shedding light on a hidden sin exposes it to society, which results in severe scrutiny and shame. Levy's literary criticism asserts that "images of brightness in the outward world [of the novel...] are predominantly negative in force [..

. and] the punitive action of sunlight defines the extremity of Hester's offense" (Levy 380). Levy claims that the use of light in this novel symbolizes the harmful ignominy accompanying unmasked transgression. This idea is reinforced by Hester's exit from jail: as she comes out of her gloomy, hidden

cell and steps into the public, the town beadle declares that in this rigid Puritan community, “iniquity is dragged out into the sunshine!” (Hawthorne 62). Immoral behavior will be uncovered and exposed in this society, and those who have committed it will be subjected to the harsh judgement that sunlight symbolizes.

Hawthorne’s use of the word “dragged” implies that sinners are reluctant to reveal their transgressions, and have a reason to be. The intense examination and ostracism of a sinner results in shame; therefore, it is understandable why sinners would prefer to hide their wrongdoings. This sunshine that Hester is unwillingly forced into seems to be “meant for no other purpose than to reveal the scarlet letter on her breast” (Hawthorne 82). Sunlight, and society, have a sole role of exposing a sinner’s immoral behavior, which will lead to disgrace and isolation of a sinner. This idea is further emphasized by the time of Hester’s scaffold ignominy: it takes place at midday, which is the time of brightest light. As she stands upon this platform of humiliation, “the hot, midday sun [is] burning down upon her face and lighting up its shame” (Hawthorne 69).

During the day, when the light is the most intense, Hester is subjected to the severest of society’s judgement. Levy’s literary criticism reinforces this idea when it describes how “the sun glitters mercilessly upon the scarlet letter” (Levy 380). In making this comment, Levy asserts that the sun concentrating on the token of Hester’s sin resembles how this Puritan community’s scrutiny focuses solely on her misdeed (Levy 380). Light’s harsh glare symbolizes society’s judgement of sinners, and when a shadowed sin is exposed, the sinner will suffer public ignominy and condemnation. Although disclosure of a <https://assignbuster.com/shedding-light-on-sin/>

sin results in shame from society, sunshine conversely represents how revealing a sin allows a sinner to achieve release. This double meaning of sunlight is explored in Levy's literary criticism, which claims that "the use of light to represent lawlessness and shame and alternatively love indicates the protean nature of Hawthorne's symbols; no single appearance of an image carries an implication of finality or ultimate intention" (Levy 380).

While Levy's claim asserts that light embodies both shame and love, evidence from *The Scarlet Letter* suggests that the second meaning of light is primarily release from the negative consequences of sin. However, in order to achieve this freedom, sinners must first atone for their transgressions. This idea is demonstrated when Hester and Pearl approach the sunshine in the forest: the light "withdrew itself" because the adulteress and the embodiment of her sin have not yet achieved release (Hawthorne 175). However, when Hester allows Pearl to run ahead of her, the child is able to "actually catch the sunshine, and stood laughing in the midst of it, all brightened by its splendor" (Hawthorne 176). When not burdened by the wrongdoing she represents, Pearl can be free to reach the moral liberty that light symbolizes. On the other hand, Hester is only able to reach the sunlight after she and Dimmesdale agree to flee together (Hawthorne 176).

As they plan to run away, "gloom" of their shadowed sin "vanished with their sorrow [...and] forth burst the sunshine, pouring a very flood into the obscure forest" (Hawthorne 192-193). As the two lovers come to terms with their sin, the darkness that symbolized it disappears, and they can finally reach the release that sunlight represents.

This shows how in this novel, light is also used to embody liberations from misdeeds and their consequences. This freedom allows a sinner to achieve release from the weight of his or her wrongdoing. The Scarlet Letter's contrasting uses of darkness to represent both sin and character obscurity, and light to symbolize both shame and release, reflect the many-sided aspects of Hawthorne's symbolism, and show that there can be both benefits and downsides to hiding or revealing a wrongdoing. When one masks a sin, they are spared from society's harsh judgement, but this concealment can overshadow and darken one's life. Conversely, the confession of a sin subjects one to the scrutiny of society, but ultimately the individual is able to achieve release. Initially, it may seem easier to shadow a secret in lies and deceit.

Admitting a dark truth is difficult, and fears of negative consequences often provoke sinners to remain silent. Although confessing a secret sin can lead to ignominy from others, ultimately the emotional liberation that accompanies confession make revealing a secret worth it.