

Scarlet letter light and dark motif

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



In order to portray the overall theme of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne uses motifs, which are recurring concepts or contrasts. From the beginning of the novel and throughout, there are clear examples of light versus dark that are used to set tone and mood, and used for character development. Hawthorne utilizes the idea of light versus dark, or day versus night to convey the theme of covert sin and overt abomination. In the beginning of the novel, Hawthorne displays this contrast by pinning Hester and Chillingworth in scenes that he describes as dark or shaded.

When Hester first left the prison in chapter two, Hawthorne describes the scene as a "black shadow emerging into the sunshine." Then in chapter nine, the same motif is brought up several times. When describing Roger Chillingworth, Hawthorne states that his new purpose was "dark... if not guilty," using the absence of light to show the absence of morality in Chillingworth's new point of view. In the same chapter, Hawthorne illustrates that "[Dimmesdale's] dawning light would be extinguished" with the arrival of Chillingworth.

Again, he uses light as a substitute for Dimmesdale's purity and morality. When discussing Roger's intentions of discovering all of Dimmesdale's secrets, Hawthorne describes it as "probing everything with a cautious touch, like a treasure seeker in a dark cavern." This illustrates Dimmesdale's dark side that is brimming with secrets which Chillingworth is dying to discover. There is also evidence of this motif in the structure of Dimmesdale's home. His quarters are described as being sunny and bright with Chillingworth's side of the house being dark in contrast.

However, the most significant usage of this motif before chapter twelve is in chapter nine when Hawthorne states, " If the latter possess... intuition... then... the soul of the sufferer [will] be dissolved, and flow forth in a dark, but transparent stream, bringing all its mysteries into the light. " This example is referring to Dimmesdale, the cause of his suffering, and how to stop his suffering. Hawthorne is utilizing this motif to say that Dimmesdale's transgressions are hidden in darkness and must be shown in the light of day for the townspeople to see.

The light versus dark motif returns again in chapter twelve when Dimmesdale awakens in the night to walk to the scaffold. Dimmesdale sleepwalks to the scaffold where he subconsciously, but also consciously, wants to be. This is conscious because he wants the redemption that comes with confession for his transgressions, yet he is too cowardly to do it in the light of day. It is also subconscious because he didn't mean to walk there, he was under the spell of somnambulism.

He goes to the scaffold and screams, thinking that the townspeople would rush to the sight and his confession would at last be heard, however, the shriek he makes is found only in his imagination. All the townspeople were at the deathbed of the Governor and all were returning to their homes, and as they were returning, Dimmesdale sees Hester and Pearl walking past the scaffold and calls out to them. After Pearl and Hester find Dimmesdale on the scaffold, a meteor shoots across the sky blazing the horizon with a fiery light.

This light appears to carry the letter A along with it, which appeals to the light and dark motif, because it is a light in the dark carrying the letter that symbolizes the suffering of the poor Reverend. The whole chapter is

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centered around the fact that this all occurs in the dark, and that fact strengthens the statement that a motif of light and dark is used to convey the covertness of Dimmesdale's sin, and in contrast, Hester's overt sin. In chapter sixteen, when Pearl and Hester go to the beach together, little Pearl says " Mother, the sunshine does not love you.

It runs away and hides itself, because it is afraid of something on your bosom. " This is an example of the light versus dark motif because Pearl is saying the light of the sun is running away from the symbol Hester adorns. The light runs from the scarlet letter because the symbol is the absence of purity while light is the epitome of purity. There is also a whole chapter called " A Flood of Sunshine" where the ideas of light and dark are bounced back and forth throughout. There is mention of literal sunshine and sunbeams bursting through the trees shining onto them, in a forest which is referred to by the town as the Black Forest.

The whole chapter is set in the Black Forest where the majority of the tone of the chapter is bright, happy, joyful and carefree. This contrast is ironic, and kind of implies that what is " blackened" or sinful to society, can be bright and joyful under it all. This connects to the sin committed by Hester and the Reverend, which is talked about between them in the Black Forest. It is a sin to the Puritan society that they live in, just as the Black Forest is seen as a dark and scary place. In reality, however, it was a beautiful thing being shared by two people who loved each other, and the forest is actually a beautiful and bright place.

Previous to chapter twelve, there were instances of dark and light motifs used in character development and setting. In chapter twelve it is used to

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illustrate Dimmesdale's hidden sin. In the chapters after chapter twelve the motif is used as farther character development and as perception versus reality. In conclusion, this motif of light versus dark is utilized by Hawthorne to carry across the idea of good versus evil, covert sin versus overt sin, and perception versus reality.