

Hester, dimmesdale, and puritan society: the id, ego, and superego

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In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne is led to have an affair by her repressed unconscious desires, what Freud calls the id.

Similarly, Arthur Dimmesdale struggles with his internal guilt and refuses to confess his sin; he attempts to think rationally and therefore embodies the ego. Finally, Salem itself represents the superego, which confines one's behavior to societal norms; the author expresses his contempt for this Puritan society directly. Hawthorne uses these story elements in an ironic fashion, portraying the society's moral limitations as misguided and praising Hester for transcending these boundaries; using sarcastic diction, he therefore utilizes Freud's id, ego, and superego in a critical manner.

Specifically, an analysis of each character's actions—Hester's climb back into society, and Dimmesdale's cowardly self-loathing—reveals a markedly different personality in both, tying back to Hawthorne's belief of the society's hypocrisy.

Hester's affair, spurred by her subconscious desire to celebrate her mark of shame rather than let it cast a shadow on her reputation, leads her to be banished to the fringes of society; the heroic language used to describe her later reintegration suggests that Hawthorne admires Hester's drive and passion and therefore the psychological element she represents, the id.

When Hester and Roger meet face-to-face for the first time after his return, she confesses to him what he already knew: "I felt no love, nor feigned any" (Hawthorne 53). The author immediately provides us with a justification for Hester's sin, and with the phrase 'nor feigned any' he also begins to establish Hester's honesty and credibility. Despite immediately being introduced to the societal repercussions of Hester's sin—the opening scene

describes her emerging from her jail cell—Hawthorne quickly asserts his sympathy for her condition, thus establishing a precedent for further characterization. Additionally, the Letter she wears acts as the primary motivation for her actions, due to her subconscious desire to rebel against the societal restraints imposed upon her. Hawthorne calls the Letter “ her passport into regions where other women dared not tread,” suggesting that it allows her to decide her own moral state rather than have society dictate it; he describes her “ mind of native courage and activity” and glorifies her state once again (130). Given that living away from society has allowed Hester to explore these new ‘ regions,’ one can immediately conclude that Salem has restrained her moral exploration for the worse.

Hester’s creativity and her desire to change the meaning of the Letter manifest themselves through her sewing. Hawthorne states that “[s]he had in her nature a rich, voluptuous, Oriental characteristic,—a taste for the gorgeously beautiful, which, save in the exquisite productions of her needle, found nothing else, in all the possibilities of her life, to exercise itself upon” (58). Here Hawthorne offers a stark contrast to Hester’s confident exterior in the early part of the novel; having been ousted from society, she now faces limited options for daily life. In this case, specific adjectives like ‘ rich’ and ‘ voluptuous’ offer positive connotations, and these project a supportive tone for Hester despite her dismal state. Soon enough, Hester is actually able to regenerate her reputation to the point that her work became the so-called ‘ fashion,’ and the Letter is believed to stand for ‘ Able’: “ many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification” (106).

Hawthorne thereby expresses his appreciation for one's repressed thoughts simply because he considers these the most honest, given that they represent one's true lust for the forbidden.

Dimmesdale's internal guilt eats at him as he avoids confessing his crime; through his consistent attempts at self-redemption and rational thought, Hawthorne portrays Dimmesdale as the ego, but ironically so given that the character is consistently attributed features of a hypocrite. First, in multiple instances, the Reverend experiences a feeling of being watched by an 'eye': Hawthorne states that "[n]o eye could see him, save that ever-wakeful one which had seen him in his closet, wielding the bloody scourge" (Hawthorne, 97). In this case one can see the extent of Dimmesdale's guilt—while Hester has taken all the blame publicly for the adultery, he has been keeping the secret without any way to express it. Thus, his guilt manifests itself as a physical form, as an 'eye,' which follows him around. Such an eye doesn't physically exist and is rather a projection of Dimmesdale's own imagination that represents Roger Chillingworth's constant scrutiny of the Reverend (97). Although Dimmesdale attempts to avoid confronting his sin publicly given that doing so would undermine his position as a minister, Hawthorne uses Chillingworth's evil vigilance to portray the disadvantages of such rational thought. He therefore undermines the role of the ego, the part of the psyche that lacks any 'evil' or 'repressible' thoughts. Next, when in distress Dimmesdale has a tendency to speak, "pale, and holding his hand over his heart, as was his custom whenever his peculiarly nervous temperament was thrown into agitation" (77). Knowing that Chillingworth, the eye watching

Dimmesdale, previously looked on the Reverend's chest and found what can be presumed to be a red mark, a "Scarlet Letter," it can thereby be concluded that when he is nervous, Dimmesdale subconsciously attempts to cover the mark of his sin. Hawthorne through specific phrases like 'peculiarly nervous temperament' uses a sarcastic tone; this further criticizes the role of the ego in direct contrast to the praise he bestows upon the id. As such, Hawthorne portrays Dimmesdale as a coward who attempts to restrain his internal struggle with rational thought—however, this ultimately affects the character negatively given that he eventually dies of his guilt.

Thus, Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale represent the id and the ego parts of the psyche, respectively. Hawthorne portrays the repressed thoughts that one might possess as honest and beneficial, through her self-integration back into society and the respect which she garners despite her sin. In contrast, Dimmesdale's internal guilt from lack of confession gnaws at his soul and moral conscious. By extension, Hawthorne therefore criticizes the superego, represented by the Puritan society in which the characters live. This part of the psyche restrains one's behaviors within specific moral standards, set by one's surroundings. Given that Hester Prynne manages to overcome the poor reputation that Salem imposed upon her, specifically through her sewing, it is evident that Hawthorne believes the moral beliefs of the society are misguided and hypocritical. This is furthered by Dimmesdale's acceptance by the community and the efforts of church members to disregard his adultery. The portrayal of Dimmesdale as a "corrupt minister" who frequently lies, although these actions are occasionally

justified by his naïve personality, therefore perpetuates Hawthorne's firm belief that the society's morality is simply incorrect. As such, a thorough psychoanalysis of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter* reveals Hawthorne's true belief in the hypocrisy of Puritan society, and therefore also goes to show the way he views the parts of the psyche and his admiration for the id in particular.