

Scarlet letter images

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The Scarlet Letter Light, Dark, Sunlight and Shadows

Throughout his entire life, Nathaniel Hawthorne had lived in seclusion from people and society, isolating himself and his thoughts behind a mysterious shade. This may explain why the themes of sin, secrecy and guilt are used in Hawthorne's fiction, exploring hidden human dimensions.

The images of sin, secrecy, and guilt are constantly portrayed in Nathaniel Hawthorne's, *The Scarlet Letter*, through the presence of recurring motifs of light and dark, sunlight and shadows; as these themes aid the reader's depiction of the separation between evil and goodness. Images of light are seen throughout the novel *The Scarlet Letter*. These images illuminate a character's true intention and personality, yet at the same time, force a character to hide certain aspects of his personality while under the public eye.

The view of Hester on the scaffold, when she is receiving her punishment for adultery in front of the public eye, the image of light illuminates her scarlet letter and sin; liberating Hester from public judgment and the pain of concealing sin, " Those who had before known her, and had expected to behold her dimmed and obscured by a disastrous cloud, were astonished, and even startled, to perceive how her beauty shone out, and made a halo of the misfortune and ignominy in which she was enveloped. " (49).

The fact the Hester's sin is known to all and that she stands tall with her baby in her arms and the scarlet letter on her chest shows that she no longer needs to conceal anything from the public eye, " And never had Hester Prynne appeared more lady-like, in the antique interpretation of the term,

than as she issued from the prison. ” (49). After being revealed to the public, Hester must now live in isolation with nature, self-reliance and non-conformity being the ethics in her life; yet having the relief of wearing sin on her chest.

Sunlight is a naturally occurring light and one that reflects goodness and pureness in characters. It is a positive image, representing cleanliness and lack of sin in this novel. When in the forest with Pearl, the sunlight avoids Hester completely while she carries the scarlet letter on her chest, “ Mother,” said little Pearl, “ the sunshine does not love you. It runs away and hides itself, because it is afraid of something on your bosom. . . . It will not flee from me; for I wear nothing on my bosom yet! ”(161).

When she removes the letter, sunlight flows into the forest, bringing everything to light and removing any shadows present, “ So speaking, she undid the clasps that fastened the scarlet letter, and, taking it from her bosom, through it to a distance among the withered leaves. ” (191) “ All at once, as with the sudden smile of heaven, forth burst the sunshine, pouring a very flood into the obscure forest, gladdening each green leaf, transmuting the yellow fallen ones to gold, and gleaming adown the grey trunks of the solemn trees. The objects that had made a shadow hitherto, embodied the brightness now. ”(191).

The sunlight represents cleanliness; washing sin, secrecy and guilt from characters, allowing them to feel a sense of freedom, “ Her sex, her youth, and the whole richness of her beauty...” (190). With the absence of the scarlet letter, sunlight floods the forest and surrounding area around Hester and Dimmesdale, removing any shadows, which represent evil and bondage,

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and with this flood of sunshine comes a new feeling of freedom for both, exactly what sunshine represents in the text, “ And as if the gloom of the earth and the sky had been but the effluence of those two mortal hearts, it vanished with their sorrow. (190). Darkness is a constant theme in this novel, representing guilt, sin and secrecy, major themes that Nathaniel Hawthorne incorporates into his literature. Dimmesdale, Hester and Pearl meet on the scaffold, under the darkness of night and shadows, the only time that Dimmesdale can express his sin and evil, “ Mr. Dimmesdale reached the spot where, now so long since, Hester Prynne had lived through her first hours of public ignominy. ” (133).

The scaffold shows the irony of Hester and Dimmesdale’s situation because Hester, in the daylight reveals her sin to the town and could be freed from the bondage of hiding sin, and now Dimmesdale, after seven years is revealing his sin on the scaffold to only Hester at night, still feeling the pain of bondage and concealment of this sin. It is the only time that Dimmesdale, Hester’s lover and Pearl’s father ever embraces them and can openly reveal his sin, but the darkness does not allow him to be free. The minister felt for the child’s other hand and took it. The moment that he did so, there came what seemed tumultuous rush of new life, other life than his own, pouring like a torrent into his heart, and hurrying through his veins, as if the mother and child were communicating their vital warmth to his half-torpid system. The three formed an electrical chain. ” (142).

This love that the minister feels frees him of his bondage and cleanses his soul for a moment in time, yet this moment is enveloped back by the surrounding darkness that takes all hope of escape from him. Hester

experienced this escape on the same scaffold that they are on yet in the light that allowed her to live the rest of her life without this bondage to sin, that under darkness, the minister cannot be free. Light, dark, shadows and sunlight, are all motifs that Nathaniel Hawthorne uses to describe different types of emotions in the text.

Light and its more natural form in sunlight reflect the goodness in characters and the ability to be free from bondage with nothing holding you back, no pain of concealing sin. While on the other hand darkness and shadows allow the characters to reflect their emotions and reveal sin, but under darkness these emotions and secrets will not reach anyone else and will keep characters like Dimmesdale in bondage and pain.

Works Cited

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. New York: Bantam Books, 1986. Print.