

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, provides us with intricate characters to analyze and evaluate. Hawthorne carefully constructs his characters, giving them each different emotions, values, physical attributes, and thus creating different souls. One sees character development throughout the book, until at the end, one is left with an image of a seemingly "real" person. One of Hawthorne's carefully constructed characters is, Arthur Dimmesdale. With Arthur, one sees how sin changes him dramatically, causing in him moral conflicts. Dimmesdale is continually trying to see who he is.

In the beginning of Hawthorne's novel, we are introduced to Hester Prynne, who has been condemned for adultery. Through this sin, she has a child named Pearl. The bigger controversy though, is who is Hester's "partner in crime." But for seven years, Hester does not reveal it to anyone, not even her husband, Roger Prynne, who comes to town the day she is brought up on the scaffold. Prynne is not happy about finding his wife convicted of being an adulteress. He feels that the other guilty party should be up on the scaffold with her. His deep want to find the guilty party, leads him to disguise his identity, and he becomes, Roger Chillingworth. Hester agrees to keep his secret. The novel takes us through the seven years that Hester keeps quiet. A reader of the novel finds out early that Arthur Dimmesdale is the man Hester is trying to protect.

One notices, that even in the beginning, there is deep inner conflict affecting Dimmesdale. On the scaffold stands his parishioner, and his lover, Hester. She is publicly paying for her sin of adultery, and although she has the opportunity, she does not reveal Dimmesdale to the public. Dimmesdale is lost. He wants to confess, but he is scared. He is a clergyman. How would the public view him? Would they look at his sin, and be disgusted? Or, would they look at his sin, and find him stronger for confessing? Dimmesdale, does not know. Thus, he chooses not to tell what he did. It is this choice, which brings about his downfall. From this point on, we see Dimmesdale become weaker and more dependant.

Chillingworth, claiming to be a doctor, befriends Dimmesdale. The two men live together, without knowing the other's real identity. But, soon enough, the truth comes out. Chillingworth discovers a marking on Dimmesdale's chest, leading him to realize that the clergyman is guilty. Hester reveals to Dimmesdale, the true identity of Chillingworth. At this point, there are no more secrets, in this triangle of sin. These three characters all know the truth about one another, but they go on living as if nothing has changed.

At one point in the story, Dimmesdale goes to the scaffold by himself, in the dead of the night. This is his way of revealing his sin. While he is there, Hester and Pearl walk by. He calls to them and asks them to join him on the scaffold. Pearl, being the child she is, asks him to stand on the scaffold with them tomorrow afternoon. She wonders why they have to do it at night. Dimmesdale tells her that he can't do it tomorrow, but promises her that sometime soon, "at the great judgement day" (*The Scarlet Letter*, p.149), they will stand together. He also makes the comment, "But the daylight of this world, shall not see our meeting." One wonders if Dimmesdale is ever going to confess. His comment shows his fear of what the public will think. Later on in the novel, Dimmesdale and Hester speak with each other in the forest. This is when she reveals Chillingworth's identity. Dimmesdale gets angry with Hester, but soon sees that she is not at fault. He realizes that Chillingworth, has been deliberately torturing him. He is afraid. Hester suggests that they leave the town. Dimmesdale is skeptical at first, but eventually agrees.

Dimmesdale starts to change at this point of the novel. He is still weak and close to dying. The guilt he feels is still eminent after all these years. Trying to make up for not confessing, he starts punishing himself. Fasting, self-mutilation, and beatings are some of the ways he tries to make up for his sin. One realizes that Dimmesdale is a weak person. One knows that he is truly sorry for what has happened, but he chooses not to do anything about it. He is scared and worried about what others will think of him. This leads him to torture himself.

But after speaking with Hester in the forest, his demeanor changes. He looks around at the townspeople, and realizes that they all have sinned too. He accepts the fact, that no one is perfect. At last, he seems to be happy. After he and Hester decide to leave the town, there is hope in his heart.

Before they leave the town, Dimmesdale has to give his election day sermon. He realizes that this is his responsibility, so they postpone their departure. Election day is a big event in the town, so there is much pomp and circumstance. During the procession, Dimmesdale's change in demeanor is very evident. His step is lighter. The hand that used to rest ominously over his heart, is no longer there. Dimmesdale is walking straighter and the energy he has, is similar to that of when he first stepped on the New England soil. "Yet, if the clergyman were rightly viewed, his strength seemed not of the body. It might be spiritual..." (The Scarlet Letter, p. 223) It seems as if a weight has been lifted off of his soul. Mentally, one isn't sure if Dimmesdale knows what is going on around him.

During the sermon, one of the sailors, from the boat on which Dimmesdale, Hester, and Pearl were to make their escape, approaches Pearl. The sailor tells Pearl to relay to Hester, that Chillingworth will bring Dimmesdale to the ship. Hester is frightened, because Roger has found out. She realizes that he is not going to let go of this obsession.

Dimmesdale delivers a inspirational speech that is met with rousing applause. His parishioners look up to him with awe and wonder. They realize, though, that death is upon him, and that he will be leaving them soon. During the procession, Dimmesdale pauses directly in front of Hester and little Pearl. Surprisingly, he calls to both of them to come to him. His look was ghastly, but in it there was a subdued and tender triumph. Chillingworth, sensing what is about to happen, pleads with Dimmesdale to stop before it is too late. Dimmesdale seems to have strength to tell him, "Methinks thou art too late!" (The Scarlet Letter, p235). One realizes what he is about to do when he says to Chillingworth, "Thy power is not what it was! With God's help, I shall escape thee now!" (The Scarlet Letter, p. 235) Dimmesdale takes Hester's and Pearl's hands and pleads with them to support him on the scaffold. On the scaffold, Dimmesdale starts his long-awaited confession. It takes every last breath of him, but he does it. Dimmesdale dies a forgiven man, by at last confessing what he had done seven years ago. Little Pearl finally gives him a kiss, after he confesses, which brings happiness to his heart, and breaks the spell that has held grief over little Pearl for so long. For one instant, the three had been a family. That one instant was enough for little Pearl and Hester to push on.

Throughout the book, we see Dimmesdale as being weak. He constantly depends on Hester to be his support. For instance, both times at the scaffold, he needed her there. His dependence on Chillingworth is also evidence of his weakness. One can also say, that he was a good man, who was too overly conscious of what other people were going to think. In the end though, it took a big man to confess like he did. He could have just died. But, one can also say, that he took the easy way out. He confessed, knowing that he wouldn't have to deal with the snickers, the dirty looks, or the ostracism, that had plagued Hester for so many years.

Arthur Dimmesdale turned out to be a man without the strength needed to stand up for what was right. He ended up being a weaker person than Hester Prynne, considering all that Hester went through. Needless to say though, The Scarlet Letter, used his weakness to its advantage. Hawthorne allowed Chillingworth to toy with Dimmesdale. Hawthorne allowed Hester to be Dimmesdale's support. Hawthorne allowed the people to influence Dimmesdale. Hawthorne allowed Dimmesdale to become, as people today would call it, a follower and not a leader. Dimmesdale added character and flavor to this novel. With him, one feels pity, anger, and frustration. The character of Dimmesdale is excellently constructed through the actions and words that Hawthorne writes.

