

Secrets. We Have Them, We Hide Them, but Can We Live With Them?

Deception is defined by Webster's Dictionary as the art of misrepresentation. Throughout the history of mankind, the use of deception to promote oneself to a higher level, or to hide one's past, has been a common occurrence. In the novel *The Scarlet Letter*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Chillingworth and Dimmesdale both use deception to hide secrets from each other, and from the rest of the town.

Hester Prynne is the only one who knows the secrets that Dimmesdale and Chillingworth are hiding from the townsfolk. Hester has to control her desire to tell the truth and practices the art of deception to hide these secrets. When she will not reveal the father of Pearl, Reverend Dimmesdale says, "She will not speak." It is ironic that the person who committed the sin with Hester is the one who announces publicly that she will not reveal the name of the other sinner. Later, Chillingworth wants to know who it is and he says, "Thou wilt not reveal his name?" Hester refuses and continues to hold her silence. Then Chillingworth, still trying to find out the name of her lover, comments, ". . . but Hester, the man lives who has wronged us both! Who is he?" When he says this, he is hinting that he is going to do something to Dimmesdale. This is why Hester makes Chillingworth promise not to kill her lover if he finds out his identity. Chillingworth deserves to know who slept with his wife, although Hester should not have had to tell him. I think that Dimmesdale should have admitted that he was Pearl's father. Today, if a priest admitted such a crime, he would probably be sent to jail. However, in the novel, had Dimmesdale confessed, the townsfolk would have liked him even more. Hester also has to live with, and conceal, the secret that the scholar, Chillingworth, is her husband. When he comes to visit her in jail he says, "Thou hast kept the secret of thy paramour. Keep, likewise, mine! There are none in this land that know me. Breathe not, to any soul, that thou didst ever call me husband." Hester shows great strength of character by her ability to keep the secret identities of her lover and her husband. There must have been times when the temptation to reveal her secrets was overwhelming.

Dimmesdale chooses to conceal his guilty secret from the townsfolk, but this causes great personal suffering and the gradual deterioration of his health. He shows that he is having trouble dealing with his sin when he keeps his hand over his heart to hide an imaginary "A" on his chest, just like the one embroidered on Hester's bodice. Dimmesdale believes that everyone can see this imaginary "A". This is shown by the quotation, "Mr. Dimmesdale was overcome with in a great horror of mind, as if the universe were gazing at a scarlet token on his naked breast, right over his heart." This feeling of guilt is a very natural one that we have all experienced some time in our lives. The irony of the situation is shown by the quotation, "People say, that the Reverend Master Dimmesdale, her godly pastor, takes it very grievously to heart that such a scandal should have come upon his congregation." Dimmesdale is so successful at hiding his secret, that the townsfolk believe that he is shocked that a scandal could happen in his congregation. As a clergyman, Dimmesdale is aware of the mental torture caused by guilty secrets. He describes these feelings with reference to his parishioners, but they could easily be applied to himself, "they shrink from displaying themselves black and filthy in the view of men;..... So to their unutterable torment, they go about among their fellow-creatures looking pure as new-fallen snow; while their hearts are all speckled and spotted with iniquity..." Finally, Dimmesdale cannot live with the secret any more, and confesses his sin before the townsfolk, "Hush, Hester, hush!.....The law we broke! -- the sin here so awfully revealed!". It is interesting that Dimmesdale is convinced that there is an "A" on his chest. Was this "A" carved in his flesh by his own hand, was it placed there by God, or was it just in his imagination? We will never know the answer to this question, but I think that Hawthorne meant it to be an imaginary

"A".

Doctor Chillingworth, knowing that he has been betrayed, dedicates seven years to identifying his wife's lover. The reader first learns of this when Chillingworth says to Hester, ". . . but Hester, the man lives who has wronged us both! Who is he?" Chillingworth has already decided to find this man and to torture him. When he realizes that Hester will not tell him who it is, he says, "He bears no letter of infamy wrought into his garment as thou does; but I shall read it in his heart." He believes that he will identify this man by the sign of his sin embedded in his chest, like the "A" on Hester's cloths. This literary foreshadowing hints that the secret will have something to do with the word "heart." Whenever the author talks about the "A" or about Hester, not referring to Dimmesdale, he uses the words "bosom" or "chest".

In the novel *The Scarlet Letter*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale and Doctor Roger Chillingworth hide secrets from the other characters. Hester Prynne is the only character who knows about these secrets. Dimmesdale and Chillingworth are masters in the art of deception.

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