

The Scaffold

The *Scarlet Letter*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne, is characterized by three major events that occur on the town scaffold. What takes place on this platform will determine the path which the three main characters, Hester Prynne, Mr. Dimmsdale, and their daughter Pearl will follow. The three scenes mark the beginning, middle, and end of their ignominy.

The scaffold is a platform where criminals are punished before all the townspeople. In this case, the criminal is Hester Prynne and the crowd has gathered to witness her shame. The first scene at the ominous platform is Hester's first public appearance with the child and the scarlet letter. Hester's husband, Roger Prynne (Chillingworth) makes a sudden reappearance and is among the onlookers. The Reverend Mr. Dimmsdale is also there but he does not stand with Hester on the scaffold, instead he stands on the balcony with those who pass judgment on her.

During this time, Reverend Mr. Wilson demands that Hester give the name of her lover. He gives her the chance to "take the scarlet letter off [her] breast" if she were to "speak out his name" (64). Had she relented and revealed his name she might never have had to endure the humiliation of the scarlet letter. But she refused, and so her path was set.

The second time at the scaffold was a turning point for Hester. She, Pearl, and Dimmsdale are together for the first time, "...the three formed an electric chain" as if they were always meant to be together if something, or someone, had not gotten in their way (140). But it is here that Hester finally realizes the damage which hiding Chillingworth's identity has caused Dimmsdale. Chillingworth was "a secret enemy...continually at his side, under the semblance of a friend and helper..." when in truth he was tormenting Dimmsdale at every opportunity (153). When Hester sees the miserable state that he is in, weak and "on the verge of lunacy", it leads her to later seek him out in the forest to confess the true identity of Chillingworth, which in turn leads to their plan to leave Salem.

Their plans were never carried through because of another visit to the scaffold. This time, Hester, Dimmsdale, and Pearl stood hand in hand before the town. Dimmsdale relieves his conscience and denounces Chillingworth for his lust for vengeance. After this final catharsis, Dimmsdale "sinks into a deep repose" and receives some closure before he death (233). " 'There was no one place so secret, no high place nor lowly place, where thou couldst have escaped me save on this very scaffold,' " says Chillingworth (231). In the end, the place of their punishment also brought them peace.

The direction of Hester, Pearl, and Dimmsdale's lives were changed by the fateful events at the scaffold. The cycle of their ignominy was expressed throughout The Scarlet Letter by these scenes. The scaffold became a place where the truth and their sins were exposed.

