The Scarlet Letter Essay, Research Paper

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The Weed That Becomes Uprooted

Nathaniel Hawthorne s novel, The Scarlet Letter, is full of symbols. The names of characters and images, portrayed throughout the novel, have symbolic meaning. Roger Prynne returns to his wife in Boston only to find she has committed adultery. He changes his name to Roger Chillingworth in hopes of finding out who is the father of his wife s daughter. He becomes obsessed with revenge. The word chilling has the synonyms cold, unfriendly, and depressing. Chillingworth s name is a symbol that foreshadows the effects of revenge on his mind, body, and soul.

Throughout his work Hawthorne makes use of, symbols which often are so commonplace and natural as to escape notice (Turner 151). The story and symbolism of The Scarlet Letter give plausibility to the statement that this novel is Hawthorne s finest piece of work. With respect to symbolism, The Scarlet Letter is very unique among Hawthorne s other work. In the habit of seeing meanings in everything, he thought in symbols and wrote in symbols (Turner 151). There is not a problem securing a symbolic status, as the focus of the book is the written significance of the symbol. The symbolic method is inherent in the subject, just as the subject of symbolism is inherent in the method (Feidelson Jr. 69). The effect of the symbol of the A on Chillingworth is complete in his mind, body, and soul, as he has become completely emerged in a symbolic role.

Hawthorne uses Roger Chillingworth s name to give the reader insight as to what his character is like. Throughout the novel, Chillingworth s personality grows to become the symbol of darkness (Hull 143). As Hester s husband, Chillingworth feels it is his responsibility to find the guilty man who committed adultery with his wife. Foreshadowing into his growing obsession with revenge is apparent when Hester and Chillingworth encounter each other for the first time since Hester since Hester left her husband in Europe to settle in Boston and await his arrival. When she refuses to confess to Chillingworth who her lover is, he says, Believe me, Hester, there are a few things whether in the outward world, or, to a certain depth, in the invisible sphere of thought few things hidden from the man who devotes himself earnestly and unreservedly to the solution of a mystery (Hawthorne 75). Chillingworth is essentially saying that he will not rest until he finds the man who has Hester s heart. He slowly evolves from a man capable of love to a man capable of the greatest sin in the novel: Violating the sanctity of the human heart. Chillingworth was capable of love:

My heart was a habitation large enough for many guest, but lonely and chill, and without a household fire. I longed to kindle one! It seemed not so wild a dream, -old as I was, and somber as I was, and as misshapen as I was, – that the simple bliss, which is scattered far and wide, for all mankind to gather up, might yet be mine. And so, Hester, I drew thee to my heart, into it s inner most chamber, and sought to warm thee by the warmth which thy presence made there! (Harthorne 75).

After his discovery, Chillingworth moves closer to the scaffold and imperiously bids her to name the father of her child (Martin 113). He was disappointed that his hope of gaining his wife s affection upon arrival was destroyed and he hated the man who had gained that affection. Although his anger was understandable and forgivable, it became a fatal sin when he nourished it (Abel 209).

Chillingworth begins to suspect that Dimmesdale is Pearl s father when Reverend Dimmesdale and Governor Billingham are trying to take Pearl away from Hester. Dimmesdale gives an eloquent representation for Hester, and Chillingworth says You speak, my friend, with a strange earnestness (Hawthorne 115). It is with this suspicion that Chillingworth begins to show special interest in Dimmesdale. . Chillingworth chose reverend Dimmesdale for his spiritual guide. Around this same time, Dimmesdale began to look pale. The townspeople thought the cause of Dimmesdale s failing health was his intense devotion to his work. The real reason why he began to look so sickly was because Roger had started to prey on Dimmesdale (Martin 116). The town needs a doctor and the members of the town feel that it is an act of God that he arrives when Reverend Dimmesdale is becoming ill. That Heaven had wrought an absolute miracle, by transporting an eminent Doctor of Physic, from a German university, bodily through the air, and setting him down at the door of Mr. Dimmesdale s study! (Hawthorne 121).

Chillingworth s quest is to find out if his suspension is, in fact, reality. In order to find this out, he must get closer to Dimmesdale: The mysterious illness of Dimmesdale- mysterious to the town-is something he says he can treat, and so he becomes the minister s physician; he even lives with him (Doren 150). After Chillingworth moves in with Dimmesdale, his image in the community begins to change:

At first, his expression had been calm, meditative, scholar-like. Now, there was something ugly and evil in his face, which they had not previously noticed it grew to be a wisely diffused opinion, that the reverend was haunted either by Satan himself, or Satan s emissary, in the guise of old Roger Chillingworth (Hawthorne 134).

Hawthorne continues to make references to the darkening of Chillingworth s spirit in the chapters that follow. He is described as mysterious, old, and Satan-like.

As [Chillingworth] proceeded, a terrible fascination, a kind of fierce necessity seized the old man within its gripe and never set him free again, until he had done all its bidding. He now dug into the poor clergy man s heart like a miner searching for gold; or, rather like a sexton delving into a grave (Hawthorne 129).

Hester soon notices a change in him as well:

[Hester] was shocked, as well as wonder-smitten, to discern what a change had been wrought upon him within the past seven years The former intellectual and studious man, calm and quiet, which was what she best remembered in him, had altogether vanished and had been succeed by an eager, searching, almost fierce look (Hawthorne 169).

These observations by the author and Hester help the reader to understand how Chillingworth is becoming more and more like his name. He is cold, harsh, furtive, and callous by the end of the novel. The more time Chillingworth spends with Dimmesdale, the more pernicious he looks. The more Roger takes out of Dimmesdale the uglier Roger begins to look and the sicker Dimmesdale becomes. Exacting retribution on a person can be healthy to a certain point. When it goes beyond that point and become an obsession, it is unhealthy (Hull 145). His whole body frame changes and he begins to look like Satan.

While living together, Chillingworth constantly digs for Dimmesdale to release his secret, but he will not reveal it, and his condition becomes worse. Finally, Chillingworth catches Dimmesdale sleeping and thrust aside the vestment to discover the letter A upon his chest. With no doubt in Chillingworth s mind about Dimmesdale s relation to Pearl, his torment toward him increases. Chillingworth is now in complete control of Dimmesdale, whose health is deteriorating. The character of Chillingworth also helps Hawthorne to convince the reader that revenge can be dangerously destructive (Hull 145). Chillingworth gets very excited with his new irrefutable proof and his whole body forms like that of the devil.

But with what a wild look of wonder, joy, and horror! With what a ghastly rapture, as it were, too mighty to be expressed only by the eye and features, and therefore bursting forth through the whole ugliness of his figure, and making itself even riotously manifest by the extravagant gestures with which he threw up his arms toward the ceiling, and stamped his foot upon the floor! Had a man seen old Roger Chillingworth at that moment of ecstasy, he would have had no need to ask how Satan comports himself when a precious soul is lost to heaven, and won into his kingdom (Hawthorne 167).

In the final pages of Hawthorne s work, Dimmesdale finds the strength to confess his sin and then dies. Nothing was more remarkable than the change, which took place, almost immediately after Dimmesdale s death, in the appearance and demeanor of the old man known as Chillingworth. All his strength and energy- all his vital and intellectual force- seemed at once to desert him; in so much that he positively withered up, shriveled away, and almost vanished from mortal sight, like an uprooted weed that lies wilting in the sun (Hawthorne 256). Hawthorne says, This unhappy man made the very principle of his life to consist in the pursuit and systematic exercise of revenge (Hawthorne 257). Because he had given his entire life, energy, and being to destroying Dimmesdale, when Dimmesdale died, Chillingworth had nothing left to live for; therefore, he died as well.

When Chillingworth dies he becomes the greatest sinner in the novel. Chillingworth never sought redemption or received punishment for his sin; therefore, he died a sinner. According to Khan, his soul would be forever stained with sin. Hester reveals Chillingworth s true identity to Dimmesdale, and as a minister, his reply was:

We are not, Hester, the worst sinners in the world. There is one [sinner] worse than even the polluted priest! That old man s [Chillingworth] revenge has been blacker than my sin. He has violated, in cold blood, the sanctity of a human heart. Thou and I, Hester, never did so! (Hawthorne 169).

There was never a time in which Chillingworth showed remorse or pit for Dimmesdale. They [Puritans] believe that Hester expiated her evil by means of repentance and a virtuous laterlife: Hester represents the repentant sinner, Dimmesdale the half-repentant sinner, and Chillingworth the unrepentant sinner (Khan). In the end, Chillingworth lost his mind, body, and soul to revenge.

In conclusion, revenge consumed the once intelligent and calm man. Roger Prynne transformed into Roger Chillingworth, the once respected physician into a Satan-lie creature. Revenge is destructive to all the people involved and the only way to relieve guilt is to confess and ask for forgiveness. Hester had no choice; she was forced to admit her sin. On the other hand, Dimmesdale almost let his guilt finish him. Chillingworth never admitted guilt for his deception and torture of Dimmesdale. Consequently, sin took over and brought him to his death. He did not die with respect like Dimmesdale and Hester. He just passed away. Chillingworth is the weed that becomes uprooted in The Scarlet letter. Roger Chillingworth leeches on Arthur Dimmesdale in order to get retribution on him. Chillingworth can also be compared to a weed, because a weed is something annoying that lives off of other plants. Once Dimmesdale dies, Roger begins to wilt and die. He dies because there is nothing left to nourish him.

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32c