

English 11AP

Travis Gatewood

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Scarlet Letter Summary Activities

I. In The *Scarlet Letter*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Arthur Dimmesdale is a main character

who serves as a reflection of a major theme in the story. Reverend Dimmesdale is a “young clergyman” who comes from the English university, Oxford (Hawthorne 55). He is well-respected among the people of Boston because of his “eloquence and religious fervour” along with his “high native gifts and scholar-like attainments” (55). These attributes also contribute to his renown in the spiritual world of clergymen. Dimmesdale is seen as “little less than a heaven-ordained apostle” (96). When he delivers sermons, his words affect the townspeople “like the speech of an angel” (55). Even so, Dimmesdale seems to be characterized by an “apprehensive” and “half-frightened” look that no one fully understands (55).

At first, people attribute Dimmesdale’s suffering to the “labours and duties of the pastoral relation” (88). Dimmesdale’s seemingly “unreserved self-sacrifice” only gives the people yet another reason to exalt him (88). Even so, the peoples’ praise only furthers his decline.

Unbeknownst to them, Dimmesdale is constantly tortured by the knowledge of a sin that has been burdening him. Dimmesdale begins to slowly deteriorate physically and mentally. At first, his evasiveness outside of the pulpit is only slightly noticeable to the public, yet his steady decline slowly becomes apparent. While there is disagreement as to why Dimmesdale is wasting away, there is no question as to whether or not he is. His form grows “emaciated” and his voice, though still rich, has a “certain melancholy prophecy of decay in it” (97). The people notice that each week, Dimmesdale’s “cheek [is] paler and thinner, and his voice more tremulous” (97). He is often seen, when provoked by any “slight alarm or sudden accident,” with “his hand over his

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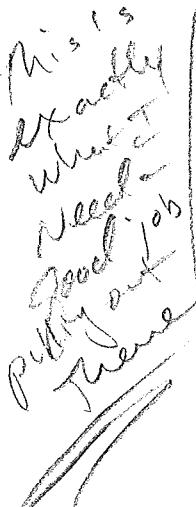
heart" and a look of pain on his face (97). Outwardly, this seems to represent a physical pain, yet in truth, this motion represents the pain of Dimmesdale's sin weighing on his heart.

Dimmesdale has committed adultery with Hester Prynne and is the father of her illegitimate child. While Hester's sin has been brought to the public eye, Dimmesdale is seen as somewhat cowardly as he tells no one of his part in the adultery. When speaking with Chillingworth, Dimmesdale says that "the heart, making itself guilty of such secrets, must perforce hold them, until the day when all hidden things shall be revealed" and only then, in the presence of God, will the sinner own up to his sins "not with reluctance, but with a joy unutterable" (105). It appears that Dimmesdale believes that one is only required to disclose his sins to God, yet he does not seem to grasp this idea himself. Pimple states that Dimmesdale's dilemma is that "he values both his social face and his immortal soul" (Pimple 1). Dimmesdale claims that he "long[s] to speak out, from his own pulpit, at the full height of his voice, and tell the people what he [is]" (114). Even so, when Dimmesdale makes attempts to do so, he either becomes too frightened to speak, or he does indeed tell the people the truth, resulting in an unexpected response. His confession only causes the people to "reverence him the more" (114). They think that if Dimmesdale sees sin in himself, he must see all the more sin in the townspeople. Over and over, Dimmesdale does not correct them, leading to his knowledge of what a "subtle, but remorseful hypocrite that he [is]" (114). He has told the truth, yet somehow he has "transformed it into the veriest falsehood" (114).

Throughout the story, this hypocrisy and inner torture serve to further the decline of Dimmesdale's physical state. Hawthorne uses physiognomy to show that Dimmesdale's outward appearance reflects his inward state. Pimple states that "Dimmesdale is so weakened and worn out that it is becoming impossible for him to maintain his false public face before his entire congregation" (Pimple 1). In the final chapters of the book, Dimmesdale is to give the Election Day Sermon. In his weakest state, he delivers such a powerful sermon that the townspeople are basically singing with "applauses of the minister" (193). In the presence of all of the

townspeople, so weak that it appears he will die soon, Dimmesdale decides to come clean of his sin. "With a flush of triumph in his face," Dimmesdale tells the people of Boston of his part in the adultery (198). He says that Hester's visible scarlet letter is "but the shadow of what he bears on his own breast" (198). Dimmesdale then says his parting words to Hester and Pearl and dies on the scaffold. This scene marks a transition in Dimmesdale. Before he dies, Dimmesdale seems to "[win] a victory" in publicly stating his part in the adultery (198). This reveals that Dimmesdale's previous ideas on whether or not sin needs to be revealed to the public in order to have soundness of mind have changed dramatically.

Throughout the book, Dimmesdale is portrayed as a round and dynamic character. He becomes increasingly broken down by this burden of untold sin. He is shown as a character with multiple personality traits, many of which can be seen in his outward appearance. Dimmesdale's changes throughout the story come to reflect a major theme in *The Scarlet Letter*: whether a sinner should be shamed publicly or allowed to suffer the consequences privately. Hawthorne shows the two differing sides through the transformation of Dimmesdale. At first, Dimmesdale keeps his secret to himself, yet is punished enough by the private torture and guilt brought on by the sin. Even so, when Dimmesdale finally tells the whole town of his sin, he experiences a sort of "triumph," a freeing sensation before he dies (198). As Dimmesdale's private suffering seems to be enough punishment, he feels victorious when he discloses his secret to the public.



Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. Boston: Prestwick House, 1892. Print.

✓ Pimple, Kenneth D. "'Subtle, but Remorseful Hypocrite': Dimmesdale's Moral

Character." Literary Reference Center. EBSCO. Web. 20 Oct. 2010.

<<http://web.ebscohost.com/lrc>>.

II. In "Psalm 32," a didactic psalm, David expresses the state of happiness that comes to those who ask for forgiveness from the Lord. He says that when he did not seek forgiveness for his sins, "[his] bones waxed old through [his] roaring all the day long" (3). This means that his physical and mental state wasted away while he obsessed solely over his sin. Similarly, "[his] moisture [was] turned into the drought of summer," meaning his strength was lost (4). But after he confessed his "transgressions" to the Lord and no longer hid them, the Lord "forgavest the iniquity" of his sin (5). David emphasizes that while he is a sinner, he is forgiven. He is sheltered from trouble and encompassed with "songs of deliverance" (7). He says that "many sorrows shall be to the wicked: but he that trusteth in the LORD, mercy shall compass him about" (10).

In Dimmesdale's final speech in chapter twenty-three, a weakened Dimmesdale approaches the scaffold platform where he confesses his secret to the town with Hester at his side. Dimmesdale's physical and mental state show that he has been inwardly tortured by his sin ever since he transgressed. He speaks out of a "fathomless depth of remorse and woe," mirroring David's idea in "Psalm 32" that a sinner who has yet to confess his sin to the Lord will constantly deteriorate (Hawthorne 197). Dimmesdale states that Hester has been "so miserably burdened" by the scarlet letter she is forced to wear on her breast (197). He continues on to say that Hester's scarlet letter is "but the shadow of what he bears on his own breast;" his own sort of invisible scarlet letter has "seared his inmost heart" (198). Based on David's psalm, it would seem that Dimmesdale has not confessed his sin to the Lord, yet at the end of his speech, Dimmesdale speaks of "God's judgement on a sinner" (198). While David believes that he is able to be forgiven and even looked fondly upon by the Lord for seeking forgiveness for his sins,

Dimmesdale fears God and is afraid of the punishment that will come from his sin.

In 1930, when Grant Wood's *American Gothic* was first exhibited, some people saw this piece of art as satirical of the said characteristics of Midwestern culture. I believe the painting is indeed meant to satirize the narrow-mindedness and repression that has been said to characterize that time period. In the painting, Wood uses many instances of physiognomy to reflect certain

ideas. The long, stretched out faces are obviously meant to represent narrow-mindedness, as he portrays these people with narrow heads. The rigid posture of the man and woman show the fear of the people to stray from accepted ideas. The forlorn look in the woman's eyes shows the repressed desire to branch out. The outfits of both the man and the woman represent the strict Puritanical ideas through the simplicity of the clothes. The pitchfork in the man's hand is used to show the strict laws that people were expected to abide by, along with the harsh punishments that came from disobeying the law. The fact that the woman stands slightly behind the man shows that woman may have still been considered inferior to men. The farmhouse in the background could represent the idea that most Midwestern people lived in "old-fashioned" Puritan communities on farms. The use of physiognomy in the painting, along with other aspects, can be used to support the notion that it is meant to satirize Midwestern culture.

IV. Handed in separately

V. Attached



*Jack Catalogue
Delafield*

*Really nice
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Activities*