

The Torturing Sentiment of Guilt - Outline

- I. Arthur Dimmesdale
 - A. Guilt Ridden
 - B. His image amongst the people is killing his conscience
 - C. Tries feverishly to justify his sin
 - D. A good man, so his sins are bothering him
 - E. Creates much of the tension
 - F. Contributed to his death

- II. Guilt and it's effect on his actions
 - A. Always covered his heart
 - 1. Thought he had something to hide
 - 2. Some believe it's a Scarlet Letter
 - B. Constantly nervous
 - 1. Even though the public adores him, he never feels calm
 - 2. Guilt tortures him all day long
 - C. Planned to run away
 - D. Caused dramatic confession on the scaffold
 - E. Tries to talk to Hester for comfort, but only in forest
 - F. Forest symbol for concealment – symbolism
 - G. Dimmesdale's holy, but he's feeling bad, Hester's condemned by public, but she's not feeling as bad – Antithesis

- III. Hester
 - A. Not feeling as guilty as Dimmesdale
 - 1. Her sin is made public
 - 2. Confession releases her of her guilt
 - B. Her isolation makes her stronger
 - C. Forgave herself for her actions
 - D. Guilt causes her to try to become a better person
 - E. Isolation shields her and Pearl from Puritan Influence - Irony
 - F. The people condemn Pearl partly because she's so pretty – Irony
 - G. Pearl is the symbol of her sin – symbolism
 - H. Scarlet Letter symbol of beauty – symbolism

- IV. Feels guilty however to keeping Chillingworth's identity from Dimmesdale
 - A. If Dimmesdale knew that Chillingworth was her husband, he would have acted differently
 - B. Would have saved him pain/agonny

The Torturing Sentiment of Guilt

For thousands of years, guilt has shaped the lives of men of all classes, races, and cultures. Originating from one's conscience, guilt has the ability to capture one's heart and soul, causing the individual extreme uncertainty and misery. In addition, people heavily affected by guilt will make an intense effort in a feverish attempt to rid them of a sentiment that almost turns every minute into torture. In The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne, the most honored and venerated figure in Puritan society was deeply agonized by his conscience. Normally, guilt would turn a man's life into a living nightmare, yet there are also times where it could be a blessing in disguise.

Arthur Dimmesdale was a reverend and a respected figure in the small Puritan town of Boston, MA during the mid 1600's, yet his conscience was torturing him. Although some even considered him "too holy for Earth," he knew that he has committed the intolerable sin of adultery. Soon, the public's adoration became a problem, for simply listening to their praise hurt him. Since he had high moral standards, guilt began to control his life, and he tried everything in his power to justify his sin; everything except a public confession. It was his failure to confess that caused him all of his pain and agony, but unfortunately, he did not realize his mistake until just before his death. However, he did ask Hester to rescue him from his predicament. As Hester held Pearl on the scaffold, he made multiple implications that he wanted her to reveal him as Pearl's father, and in doing so, end his suffering. "...I charge thee to speak out the name of thy fellow-sinner and fellow sufferer! Be not silent from any mistaken pity and tenderness for him...though he were to step down from a high place, and stand there beside thee, on thy pedestal of shame, yet better were it so, than to hide a guilty heart through life." (Page 47)

Dimmesdale's guilt began to have an effect on his behavior soon after Hester left the scaffold. He often covered his heart with his hand, and he was nervous and frail. The public, however, believed his actions were due to his failing health and praised him further. This idea made the already guilt ridden reverend feel even more guilty. Deciding that he could not live happily without justifying his crime, he began to hold vigils at night. He even kept a whip in his house, and beat himself in a desperate attempt to find solace. Deep in his heart, he was very well aware that the only method of redemption was to confess to the public, but fearing humiliation, he continued to search for alternative ways to rid him of the guilt that has controlled his life. He tried to speak with Hester to temporarily relieve him of his pain, but would only do so when they were alone in the forest, which was an excellent symbol of concealment. In fact, he even planned to escape to Europe with Hester and Pearl to start a new life. Finally, after giving his Election Day Sermon, his guilt caused him to confess to the entire town that he was Pearl's father. After so many unsuccessful attempts at redemption, Dimmesdale finally surrendered his pride and forgave himself just seconds before his death. "People of New England! Ye that have loved me! Ye that have deemed me holy! Behold me here, the one sinner of the world! I stand upon the spot where, seven years since, I should have stood...but there stood one in the midst of you, at whose brand of sin and infamy ye have not shuddered!" (Page 174)

While Dimmesdale kept his sin a secret, the town knew Hester as an adulteress, and forced her to wear a scarlet A on her gown. Although the scarlet letter was designed to be an icon of guilt, her fancy needlework almost transformed it into a symbol of beauty. Moreover, due to her forced confession, her guilt did not have as dramatic of an effect on her as it did on Dimmesdale. Although the people condemned her, she forgave herself for her sin, and in doing so, did not experience the pain that the supposedly holy Dimmesdale did. Also, her guilt made

her push herself to become a better person, doing charitable work that eventually changed her image in the eyes of the public. Ironically, her isolation from the Puritans shielded both her and Pearl, the symbol and constant reminder of her sin, from conformist influence resulting in Pearl having her own unique personality and values. In addition, Pearl's beauty causes her much of her criticism in town, for many believe that the result of adultery would be an ugly, troubled child. "The little Puritans...had got a vague idea of something outlandish, unearthly [so shouldn't be so pretty], or at variance with ordinary fashions, in the mother and child; and therefore scorned them in their hearts..."

Even though she forgave herself for her sin of adultery, she still felt guilty for hiding Chillingworth's identity from Dimmesdale. If Dimmesdale knew that Chillingworth was her husband, he would never have asked him to be his physician, and would save himself a great deal of pain and suffering. "O Arthur, forgive me! In all things else, I have striven to be true! Truth was the one virtue which I might have held fast, and did hold fast through all extremity; save when thy good, thy life, thy fame...Roger Chillingworth, he was my husband!" (Page 133)

Guilt has caused Dimmesdale much turmoil, and in conjunction with his failing health, contributed to his death. He made the fatal mistake of trying to find solace elsewhere instead of confessing his sin to the public. This mistake caused him much pain, agony, and misery. However, Hester's guilt did not cause her as much pain. In fact, in certain aspects, her guilt was a blessing in disguise. It made her strive to become a better person, and shielded her from Puritan influence. Their actions have proved that although guilt does cause one much turmoil, it could also make those strong enough to withstand it stronger.

The Torturing Sentiment of Guilt – Rough Draft

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Dimmesdale's guilt began to have an effect on his behavior soon after Hester left the scaffold. He often covered his heart with his hand, and he was nervous and frail. The public, however, believed his actions were due to his failing health. Some even believed that he had health problems at such an early age because he was too pure to live on Earth. These ideas made the already guilt ridden reverend feel even more guilty. Deciding that he could not live happily without justifying his crime, he began to hold vigils at night. He even kept a whip in his house, and would beat himself in a desperate attempt to find solace. Deep in his heart, he was very well aware that the only method of redemption was to confess to the public, but fearing humiliation, he continued to search for alternative ways to rid him of the guilt that has controlled his life. He tried to speak with Hester and temporarily relive him of his pain, but would only do so when they were alone in the forest, which was used as a symbol of concealment. In fact, he even planned to escape to Europe with Hester and Pearl to start a new life. Finally, his guilt caused him to confess to the entire town that he was Pearl's father after giving his Election Day Sermon. After so many unsuccessful attempts at redemption, Dimmesdale finally surrendered his pride and forgave himself just seconds before his death. "People of New England! Ye that have loved me! Ye that have deemed me holy! Behold me here, the one sinner of the world! I stand upon the spot where, seven years since, I should have stood...but there stood one in the midst of you, at whose brand of sin and infamy ye have not shuddered!" (Page 174)

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sin, and in doing so, did not experience the pain that the supposedly holy Dimmesdale did. Also, her guilt made her push herself to become a better person, doing charitable work that eventually changed her image in the eyes of the public. Ironically, her isolation from the Puritans shielded both her and Pearl, the symbol and constant reminder of her sin, from conformist influence resulting in Pearl having her own unique personality and values. In addition, Pearl's beauty causes her much of her criticism in town, for many believe that the result of adultery would be an ugly, troubled child. "The little puritans...had got a vague idea of something outlandish, unearthly [so shouldn't be so pretty], or at variance with ordinary fashions, in the mother and child; and therefore scorned them in their hearts..."

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