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Young Reverend Dimmesdale

In a colony of virtue, lies a prison. In a town of holiness, stands a scaffold. In the heart of a clergyman, hides an adulterer. These contrasts come together in the fictional town of Cornhill and all reveal the church's hypocrisy through the ironic behaviors of an imaginary 17th century society. Determined to show the contrastive irony which treads along for so many years within the Puritan Church, this creatively crafted story encapsulates the theme of duplicity throughout. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne illustrates hypocrisy through the situational irony that surrounds sinful Reverend Dimmesdale's character.

Hawthorne developed the name and role of his hypocritical protagonist Reverend Dimmesdale with subtle irony. Interestingly, Dimmesdale's name represents his true nature kept hidden from people of Cornhill. Dividing his surname reveals the ironic tension Hawthorne created starting with the first syllable. The first part of his name, Dimmes, points to the sin that dulls his heart and the sickness that darkens his life, for "in so far as he sows himself in a false light [he] becomes a shadow, or, indeed, ceases to exist" (115). Ironically, whereas the pastor should be clean or white, he lives privately as "dark, black, [and] somber" ("dim"). Following this, the second syllable of his name is dale. This Middle English surname referred to one who lived in the valley ("dale") naturally, most expect someone who knows God well to maybe visit the valley but not live in it. Sadly though, Dimmesdale's lives in a basin where "...thousand [s of] phantoms, -in many shapes of death, or more awful shame, all [flock] around..." him (112).

Finally giving Dimmesdale the title of Reverend builds an expectation of someone who lives a holy, or at least, honest life. Just as the “wives and maidens” assume, the reverend must be “godly” (44), ironically, however, he is “...utterly a pollution and a lie” (115). His paradoxical name parallels his behaviors.

The ironic actions of Dimmesdale further display his hypocrisy in his role with Hester and the church. Being with Hester in the sin of adultery, Dimmesdale duplicitously preached about the very sins he shared. Heaping his personal guilt into the sermon he taught, he caused Hester to feel that if “she entered [the] church, trusting to share the sabbath smile of the universal father, it was often her mishap to find herself the text of the discourse” (70). Dimmesdale not only mislead Hester, but he also betrayed his congregation. After leaving Hester and the woods, the Reverend responds impulsively and incongruously through a series of actions that tear down his congregation. While coming into contact with almost every segment of Cornhill’s society, the results of keeping hidden sin show their impact. To the old man who deeply respected Dimmesdale’s “upright and holy character”, the Reverend ironically must hold his tongue when blasphemous thoughts fill his mind, and then he “could recall no text of scripture, not aught else, but a brief, pithy [thought] ...” (172) with the widow who sought advice for all of her tribulations. His situation worsens to the point of almost teaching “wicked words” to the “little puritan children” (173). Obviously, by holding in his sins and covering up his A, Dimmesdale’s hypocritical choices determine his outwardly appearance in one way or another.

Dimmesdale’s looks reflect his pretense with seeable differences and hidden changes in his heart. While once young and eloquent, his appearance changes to reflect his hypocrisy. Though “...the paleness of [Dimmesdale’s] cheek was accounted for by [the congregation] to his earnest devotion to study”, in actuality the weight of pretending had worn on him until his

“health... had evidently begun to fail...” (96), so much so the elderly in the church feared he would die before them. As Hawthorne argues hypocrisy’s affects, Dimmesdale’s sins finally reflect outwardly, but he still covers the hidden results. Hypocrisy hides truth and likewise Dimmesdale covers the A that his sin etched on his chest. As he kept his secret, his guilt grew bigger and bigger in his imagination every second. While Dimmesdale accuses Hester on the scaffold, he holds his hand over his heart, covering the self-inflicted carved letter that holds so much weight and burns so fiercely to him (57). This wound he covered out of guilt to punish himself rather than asking for forgiveness and allowing Jesus to be the propitiation for his sins, something a Reverend. Once, however, Dimmesdale confesses his guilt and hypocrisy, he stands “with a flash of triumph on his face” because “God [knew]and he is merciful! He...proved his mercy, in [Dimmesdale’s] afflictions” (198-199). Though he dies, his physical appearance receives a flash of life before he passes away on the scaffold beside Hester and Pearl. Hawthorne lifts the physical irony from the Reverend once he finally reveals the his true self.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, in all aspects in *The Scarlet Letter*, builds tension through the hypocritical Reverend Dimmesdale’s ironic sinfulness. By amplifying the name and actions of the notorious character, the author floods the story with situational irony. Undeniably, Dimmesdale’s hypocritical choices shine through his ironic facade in his role with the church and Hester. Furthermore, Dimmesdale’s appearance changes throughout, mirroring his guilty heart with an evident difference from the beginning of the parable to its conclusion. By the end of the parable, the colony may not be completely virtuous, but it is more honest. Though the scaffolding still stands, it no longer symbolizes guilt and shame. Most significantly, the Reverend no longer hypocritically hides but finds freedom by exposing the truth, being kissed by his little Pearl.