

Arthur Dimmesdale as Tragic Hero

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[Granger, a professor of English at the University of Oklahoma, maintains that *The Scarlet Letter* is not Hester's story but that of Dimmesdale, whose confession bridges the gap between illusion and reality, or the ideal and actuality, thus making him a true tragic hero.]

It is my conviction that, even though Arthur Dimmesdale does not move down center until late in the action, *The Scarlet Letter* is finally his story and, what is more important, that he is a tragic hero. He alone among the major characters never functions symbolically, though he is the familiar figure of Every-Christian. Viewed thus, Hawthorne's allegorical romance centers on a good man's struggle with and eventual victory over the guilt he experiences after committing lechery. Hawthorne is saying that three courses of action are open to such a sinner: he may keep silent and suffer "eternal alienation from the Good and True," the course urged by Roger Chillingworth; or—and this implies that he will probably keep silent all the while—he may flee the scene of the crime and with it his responsibility, the course eventually urged by Hester Prynne; or he may make full and public confession, the course urged by the child Pearl. Having kept silent for more than seven years, Dimmesdale finally has his Calvinist faith put to the supreme test and, having agreed to flee Boston with Hester and their child, finds the strength to face his responsibility and confess before he dies.

Although Dimmesdale respects and, except in one instance, has never broken civil and ecclesiastical law, theocratic authority at Boston is ultimately powerless to bring him to confession. John Wilson and Governor Bellingham, the chief representatives of church and state, are ill-equipped to understand his condition and can only point to the scaffold of the pillory as the place whereon sinners must stand and reveal their sin. Is it any wonder, then, that Dimmesdale should reject their offers of assistance as he prepares to make his revelation? On the other hand, he is intimately connected with the wronged husband, the wife who was his partner in sin, and the natural child born of this sin, each of whom does in fact help him toward this revelation. And yet, were it not for his steady observance of the law, a law whose operations are symbolized by the presence of the prison, pillory, meetinghouse, and governor's hall, he could not have acted responsibly at the last. Hawthorne's Bostonians, while certainly not drawn in an altogether sympathetic light, believe that a sinner can only absolve himself of sin, God willing, by making public confession. Dimmesdale subscribes to this orthodox Calvinist belief, as he does to its corollary that good works without true faith are less than naught. Holding firmly to these beliefs, he knows from the first that nothing short of confession can bring to an end the hypocrisy he has been making of his life. He finally realizes, as Wilson and Bellingham never do, that fallen man in his search for redemption must have his faith tested by undergoing a lonely, dark, spiritual journey before he can discover the way to responsible action. No community, not even God-fearing, seventeenth-century Boston, can instruct its members what road to take. Like Job, like Bunyan's Christian, Dimmesdale feels compelled to make his way alone, realizing that the individual, seeing as the community never can how far his actual self has fallen short of his ideal, must judge himself and prescribe for his condition.

Dimmesdale began his dark journey after the moment of passion he and Hester shared in the forest. Through all the years before they meet there again, this man, a minister of God who loves the truth

and loathes the lie, has known only penance—has felt from the outset the endless searing of "his inmost heart," scourges his body and fasts and keeps long vigils, feels the hypocrisy of his position mount as he stands in the pulpit on the Sabbath and utters vague confessions, and, most painful of all, makes a "mockery of penitence" by attiring himself in his vestments one obscure night in early May and standing falsely revealed in meteor light on the scaffold where Hester was once made to stand with the infant Pearl in the bright morning sun. During this long first stage of the journey Roger Chillingworth, "a chief actor, in the poor minister's interior world," is the principal motivating force in the action; indeed, he continues forceful down to the moment Dimmesdale decides to mount the scaffold in daylight and make public confession. Until Dimmesdale recognizes him as "his bitterest enemy," Chillingworth, ostensibly the friendly physician concerned for the minister's physical well-being, resembles a more familiar kind of "leech," seeking to know what guilt lies buried in his heart and, when this secret is revealed to him, corrupting "his spiritual being" and bringing him to "the verge of lunacy." In short, Chillingworth symbolizes that force within the Christian pilgrim which prompts him to conceal his sin from the world; if ever he abandons himself to this temptation, it will destroy his moral nature and he will die unrepentant.

Brought to the threshold of insanity by this never-ceasing, always secret agony, finding no spiritual relief in the acts of penance he performs, Dimmesdale enters the most critical stage of the journey. Now his faith is to be tested more severely than it has been these seven years and, as a condition of making the journey, under circumstances that are not of his own choosing. In fact, until the second forest meeting his faith has not really been tested; unlike Hester, who has long dwelt on the outskirts of the community and is critical of its institutions, he has "never gone through an experience calculated to lead him beyond the scope of generally received laws; although, in a single instance, he had so fearfully transgressed one of the most sacred of them." The great question now is whether, for all his ministerial "eloquence and religious fervor," he will prove equal to the test. Ever fearful about venturing far from the orthodox way, finding himself in the wild forest once again, he is overwhelmed by the revitalized memory of the sin of passion committed there long ago and experiences a new temptation more terrible than any he has yet known. The beautiful Hester, who has been wandering morally ever since they sinned together, is now more his enemy than the diabolical Chillingworth. Responding to the renewed strength of her love for him, he suffers temporary suspension of the will—will-lessness being a necessary state at this stage of the journey—and calls on her to be his guide: "Think for me, Hester! Thou art strong. Resolve for me!... Advise me what to do." Hester, "fixing her deep eyes on the minister's, and instinctively exercising a magnetic power over a spirit so shattered and subdued, that it could hardly hold itself erect," advises a course of action more unorthodox than that which Chillingworth long ago imposed, though not necessarily inconsistent with it: "Leave this wreck and ruin here where it hath happened!... Begin all anew!... Exchange this false life of thine for a true one.... Give up this name of Arthur Dimmesdale, and make thyself another, and a high one, such as thou canst wear without fear or shame." No Christian, certainly not if he be a Calvinist, can deny his past, indeed his very birthright, and live at peace with himself, but at this moment a will-less Dimmesdale consents to deny his.

At this point in the journey we take hope that the child Pearl, who would have the truth known to the world, will bring her orthodox father to a sense of his responsibility, as she has not been able to bring her transcendental mother. Standing at the brookside, she in effect demands as she has before that he publicly acknowledge the existence of his daughter. Realizing that he will not "go back with us, hand in hand, we three together, into the town" at this time, she runs to the brook and washes off his

unwelcome kiss. Dimmesdale must journey on for a time "in a maze" before he feels ready to act in a way that will satisfy Pearl's demand. As he returns to the town he is incited at every step "to do some strange, wild, wicked thing or other...." Hawthorne offers the following explanation for his nightmarish encounters with people in the town: "Tempted by a dream of happiness, he had yielded himself with deliberate choice, as he had never done before, to what he knew was deadly sin. And the infectious poison of that sin had been thus rapidly diffused throughout his moral system." But now an epiphany is at hand. Seated before his unfinished sermon, he is ready and eager to follow the course of action Pearl has long been urging; contrite, he draws back from the state of moral anarchy into which harkening to Hester's advice had momentarily plunged him, and for the first time knows the full meaning of the verse in *Genesis*, "In the image of God made he man." "...flinging the already written pages of the Election Sermon into the fire, he forthwith began another, which he wrote with such an impulsive flow of thought and emotion, that he fancied himself inspired; and only wondered that Heaven should see fit to transmit the grand and solemn music of its oracles through so foul an organ-pipe as he." The man who had long looked down from his pulpit and seen his "flock hungry for the truth, and listening to my words as if a tongue of Pentecost were speaking" has found his tongue at last. Feeling himself that "heaven-ordained apostle" his parishioners long imagined him to be, he is enabled to pen a vision of the "high and glorious destiny for the newly gathered people of the Lord."

Hester's remark on the Election Day that follows, "a new man is beginning to rule over them," has a significance she did not intend and cannot comprehend: at this moment Dimmesdale is just such a man, even though his rule will last only for the time it takes him to deliver his sermon and make his revelation. As he proceeds to the meetinghouse, no longer will-less but surcharged with spiritual energy, she senses that she has lost the magnetic power she exercised over him in the forest. Here in the marketplace it is she who is weak and he who is strong, for in the final stage of the journey he has found his way out of the maze in which she still wanders. Pearl, who had washed off his kiss at the brook, wishes to "run to him, and bid him kiss me now, before all the people...." Knowing at last what it means to be a special instrument of God, Dimmesdale gives tongue to his prophecy; "never had man spoken in so wise, so high, and so holy a spirit, as he that spake this day...." Then, mounting the scaffold, supported by Hester and holding Pearl's hand and followed by Chillingworth, he confesses his sin and, stepping forth unassisted, reveals the stigma on his breast. Whereupon Pearl, having heard her father acknowledge her existence, kisses him willingly in his dying hour.

Arthur Dimmesdale is a tragic hero. Tragedy as I here conceive it arises from the tension between illusion and reality—illusion meaning the there and then, reality the here and now; illusion meaning the ideal and reality the actual conception one has of himself. The quality of the illusion matters greatly, the noblest being man's aspiration to free himself from his particular time and place; the aspiration, in Christian terms, to return to that state of bliss in which he existed before the Fall. But here a dilemma arises: all men require illusion to bring order out of the chaos of the present, but if a man persists in hiding behind his illusion he is incapacitated for meaningful action. Ethically meaningful, that is to say tragic, action is possible only when a man, guided by this noblest of illusions, steps out from behind it and, fronting the terrors of the here and now, acts in obedience to a secret impulse of his character. Whereas Dimmesdale's full revelation on the scaffold is tragic, Hester's dynamic but lawless behavior in the forest is at best heroically pathetic. Hester is incapable of acting in a way that is ethically meaningful. Like Dimmesdale she dreams of regaining paradise, but unlike him she finds she must forever hide behind this dream if she is to go on living. In suggesting that they three, Dimmesdale, Pearl, and she herself, exchange the New World for the Old, she seeks to fulfill a temporalized version

of the Edenic illusion, Boston signifying the here and now, Europe the there and then. However noble this illusion, it provides no basis for ethically meaningful action, since she is incapable of stepping from behind it and facing the present circumstance. When Pearl demands that she fasten the letter on her bosom again and Hester, having experienced temporary freedom, does so, it is with a heavy heart. "Hopefully, but a moment ago, as Hester had spoken of drowning it in the deep sea, there was a sense of inevitable doom upon her, as she thus received back this deadly symbol from the hand of fate. She had flung it into infinite space!—she had drawn an hour's free breath!—and here again was the scarlet misery, glittering on the old spot!" Her advising them to flee Boston was irresponsible because she did not gauge the actual situation accurately and, being irresponsible, it was not ethically meaningful. Nowhere in the narrative does her transcendental morality lead to tragic action. Strong she may seem: tragic she is not.

Conversely, Dimmesdale's confession is the act of a man who is tragically great. Of course, he shares in Hester's hour of transcendental freedom. Once resolved to leave Boston with Hester and their child, he is overcome by a new sensation. "It was the exhilarating effect—upon a prisoner just escaped from the dungeon of his own heart—of breathing the wild, free atmosphere of an unredeemed, unchristianized, lawless region." What saves him in the end from the self-deception that incapacitates Hester is the fact that his version of the Edenic illusion is grounded in the infinite, not in the finite world; the fact that, except for the short time he is required to wander in a maze, he knows himself to be a sinner and never mistakes penance done on earth for penitence. Like all men tragically great he sees with unflinching honesty the distance separating his ideal from his actual self and, seeing this, tries to bridge the gap. Before his hour of freedom he tells Hester, "I have laughed, in bitterness and agony of heart, at the contrast between what I seem and what I am!" Like Young Goodman Brown, he gains insight in this critical hour. "Another man," writes Hawthorne, "had returned out of the forest; a wiser one; with a knowledge of hidden mysteries which the simplicity of the former never could have reached. A bitter kind of knowledge that!" Unlike Brown because now secure in his faith, he translates insight into meaningful action, prophesying a glorious destiny for Massachusetts and publicly repenting him of his sin. Whereas Hester believes that what they did had a consecration of its own and seeks assurance that they will be united in paradise, he must tell her in his dying breath: "The law we broke!—the sin here so awfully revealed!—let these alone be in thy thoughts! I fear! I fear! It may be, that, when we forgot our God,—when we violated our reverence each for the other's soul,—it was thenceforth vain to hope that we could meet hereafter, in an everlasting and pure reunion. God knows; and He is merciful!" Dimmesdale goes to his early grave humbled and penitent, but when Hester follows him to hers many years later she is apparently unrepentant still. Hawthorne tells us that although "one tombstone served for both," there was "a space between, as if the dust of the two sleepers had no right to mingle."

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