

'Subtle, but remorseful hypocrite': Dimmesdale's Moral Character

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[(essay date fall 1993) *In the following essay, Pimple discusses Dimmesdale's hypocrisy and maintains that in the novel's forest scene, it is Dimmesdale who controls the dialogue and the action rather than Hester, as many critics contend.*]

The Reverend Mister Arthur Dimmesdale is usually understood to be guilty of two sins, one of commission (his adultery with Hester) and one of omission (his cowardly and hypocritical failure to confess).¹ This is his state through most of *The Scarlet Letter*, but when Dimmesdale meets Hester in the forest (Chapters 16-19), he agrees to flee Boston with her, to seek out a new life in the Old World, and, presumably, to live with her in adultery. By the lights of his community and his profession, this resolution is a far more serious sin than any he had committed to date, but most critics have agreed that Dimmesdale is not primarily responsible for his actions in the forest. Both Michael Colacurcio and Terence Martin have written that Hester "seduced" Dimmesdale in the forest,² and Darrel Abel argues that "Dimmesdale could not resist Hester," for in entering the forest "Hester means to persuade Dimmesdale to elope with her and Pearl," and Dimmesdale agrees to the elopement "after only a feeble show of conscience."³

The forest scene is crucial in the narrative of *The Scarlet Letter*, and a proper understanding of what happens in the forest is necessary for any interpretation of Dimmesdale's last days of life and his final "confession." I will argue in this paper that the reading of the forest scene sketched above is mistaken; that in fact it is Arthur Dimmesdale and not Hester Prynne who is the "activating agent"⁴ in the forest, increasing Dimmesdale's culpability for his most serious fall. Previous critics seem to think that Dimmesdale's much-vaunted skill as a speaker abandons him when he enters the forest with Hester, but I will show that Dimmesdale talks Hester into talking him into fleeing, and so Dimmesdale's gravest sin cannot be laid at Hester's feet at all.

Dimmesdale manipulates Hester in the forest by exploiting the same discursive strategy which allows him through the years to buttress his congregation's belief in him as a saintly minister while avoiding telling any outright lies: he plays the literal meaning of his words off against the context in which he speaks them. Dimmesdale's tone of voice, his position as minister, his reputation as a saintly man, and the genre of the sermon allow him to say, "I am the greatest sinner among you," but be *understood* to be humble, pious, and godly.

Dimmesdale's first words provide one of the best examples of his profoundly manipulative doubletalk. Hester Prynne is standing on the scaffold, wearing the scarlet letter, enduring the disdainful glance of the people of Boston. The Reverend Mr. Wilson, "the eldest clergyman of Boston,"⁵ enjoins Dimmesdale to "exhort [Hester] to repentance, and to confession" (p. 66). Dimmesdale responds thus:

"Hester Prynne," said he, leaning over the balcony, and looking down stedfastly into her eyes, "thou hearest what this good man says, and seest the accountability under which I labor. If thou feelest it to be for thy soul's peace, and that thy earthly punishment will thereby be made more effectual to salvation, 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; for, believe me, Hester, 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. What can thy silence do for him, except it tempt him--yea, compel him, as it were--to add hypocrisy to sin? Heaven hath granted thee an open ignominy, that thereby thou mayest work out an open triumph over the evil within thee, and the sorrow without. Take heed how thou deniest to him--who, perchance, hath not the courage to grasp it for himself--the bitter, but wholesome, cup that is now presented to thy lips!"(p. 67)

Fully to appreciate the plaintiveness of this utterance, it must be recognized that to the Puritans, and to Dimmesdale as a Puritan minister, the public exposure of sin is of vital importance to the sinner--thus the nature of Hester's punishment.⁶ To the townspeople, ignorant of Dimmesdale's role in Hester's sin, this utterance is clearly an order from a minister to a wayward member of his congregation. To Hester and the reader, it is also a plea for assistance. "In the terrible ambivalence of his position Dimmesdale wants Hester to name him even as he does not want to be named. He would have her pin the letter on him, but he will not reveal his partnership in it."⁷

Dimmesdale's order/plea seems quite sincere, but what are the ramifications of this sincerity? Terence Martin suggests that

the minister would like to be named and known for what he is, an adulterer. Thus, when he speaks the above words to Hester Prynne, the words themselves are true, pathetically so. Being named would bring shame and disgrace, but also the relief of standing clear in one's own identity; moreover, in this community, this "righteous" colony, there is an undeniably correct course of action for Dimmesdale to take--sin and iniquity, he knows, ought to be dragged out into the broad light of noonday. His appeal to Hester is thus pathetically sincere; he is asking her to help him in a way he cannot help himself.⁸

Dimmesdale's yearning for exposure (and inability to confess) can hardly be denied; but seen from Hester's point of view, his plea becomes insidious, for he is "urging her to provide the name if she thinks it will be good for her own soul's peace to do so (when, clearly, she would be full of self-hatred if she gave him away), while making clear to her that if she does not tell, he certainly will not."⁹ As he will do repeatedly, Dimmesdale is here speaking the truth, but making sure his words carry an extra effect. "Since he [Dimmesdale] knows that Hester loves him, he is almost sure she will *not* consider the revealing of her 'fellow-sufferer' a more effectual means to salvation."¹⁰

His entreaty is an epitome of Dimmesdale's public speaking throughout; it is "a masterpiece of double-talk,"¹¹ but double-talk of a specific type. The narrator tells us that there were ministers more learned than Dimmesdale, others more shrewd, others more pure; but unlike Dimmesdale, all of these lacked "the gift that descended upon the chosen disciples, at Pentecost, in tongues of flame ... the power ... of addressing the whole human brotherhood in the heart's native language" (pp. 141-42). Dimmesdale's is a "sad, persuasive eloquence" (p. 142) which the townspeople take to arise from his purity, though it actually owes more to his personal experience of sin.

Dimmesdale's eloquence speaks to the heart; its power comes more from affect than meaning, more from emotion than reason, more from pragmatics than semantics. "Semantics" covers what we generally think of as the "usual" or "literal" meaning of words or utterances; "pragmatics" covers the meanings added to utterances by tone of voice, context, and other non-linguistic considerations. "[N]atural language expressions do tend to have simple, stable and unitary senses (in many cases anyway), but ... this stable semantic core often has an unstable, context-specific pragmatic overlay."¹²

The importance of the pragmatic dimension of Dimmesdale's speaking is underlined in his very first utterance (his order/plea to Hester), which is described thus: "The young pastor's voice was tremulously sweet, rich,

deep, and broken. The feeling that it so evidently manifested, rather than the direct purport of the words, caused it to vibrate within all hearts, and brought the listeners into one accord of sympathy" (p. 67). The emotion behind the minister's words is also evident in his sermons, including his last sermon. Hawthorne does not present a single word of the Election Sermon; rather it is described almost solely in terms of its emotional impact, its "passion and pathos," the "atmosphere of awe and solemn grandeur" it evokes (p. 243).¹³

Dimmesdale often plays the pragmatic and semantic aspects of language off against each other in his sermons. "More than once--nay, more than a hundred times," he had told his congregation "that he was altogether vile, a viler companion of the vilest, the worst of sinners, an abomination, a thing of unimaginable iniquity" (p. 143-44). But these were empty confessions.

"The godly youth!" said they among themselves. "The saint on earth! Alas, if he discern such sinfulness in his own white soul, what horrid spectacle would he behold in thine or mine!" The minister well knew--subtle, but remorseful hypocrite that he was!--the light in which his vague confession would be viewed ... He had spoken the very truth, and transformed it into the veriest falsehood.(p. 144)

Dimmesdale's ploy is complex and subtle. He says to his congregation something like, "I am the worst sinner among you," a statement he believes to be true; he is not lying. But he knows full well that his people, in ignorance of his adultery, will interpret this not as a confession, but as an example, even a proof, of the minister's humility and piety. But the impact of an utterance (the "perlocutionary effect"¹⁴) can be effected not only by how it is said, but by who says it and under what circumstances. Although Dimmesdale's statement has a simple and straightforward semantic meaning, his status as a Puritan minister and as an upright man in the eyes of his congregation and even the very genre of the sermon add a pragmatic overlay that quite changes the message.

Dimmesdale plays on the Puritan doctrine of the innate depravity of the human soul to say one thing and *communicate* quite another. He means what he says--he really feels vile because of a very real and specific transgression--but he is heard to be commenting on the human condition, rather than on his own individual condition. Dimmesdale's hypocrisy manifests itself in the split between the semantic meaning of what he says and the pragmatic meaning conveyed by the way he says it.

Hawthorne directs attention away from Dimmesdale's ambiguous public speaking by presenting not a single word of any of his sermons in direct discourse. His sermons are brought up three times: once in terms of his recurring desire to confess, cited above; and twice in reference to specific sermons, the first presented after the midnight scaffold scene (p. 157) and the second the Election Sermon (pp. 242-44 and 248-49). Dimmesdale's sermons are presented only as indirect reported speech, their effects emphasized, their words played down. Perhaps Hawthorne deprives the reader of the substance of Dimmesdale's sermons to make it more difficult for the reader to make an independent assessment of Dimmesdale's moral character--to make the reader more like a member of the congregation, subject to Dimmesdale's subtle duplicity. Hawthorne may have been aware that it is very difficult to create the effects of a stirring sermon through the printed word.

Dimmesdale's critical private conversation with Hester in the forest follows a pattern similar to his public speaking. The forest scene, starting in Chapter 16, "A Forest Walk," and culminating in Chapter 19, "The Child at the Brook-Side," is a critical section of the narrative by any measure, but it is particularly important in terms of Dimmesdale's moral character. It is here that the minister first chooses sin consciously; before this, he had only transgressed "in a single instance," and this "had been a sin of passion, not of principle, nor even purpose" (p. 200).

It is easy to get the impression that Hester leads Dimmesdale astray in this episode. He enters the scene looking "haggard and feeble" (p. 188) and pours out his misery to her. When Hester reveals to him that

Chillingworth is her husband, he is all but undone; he "start[s] to his feet, gasping for breath, and clutching at his heart as if he would have torn it out of his bosom" (p. 192). His anguish is truly pitiable, and he at last entreats, "Think for me, Hester! Thou art strong. Resolve for me! ... Be thou strong for me! ... Advise me what to do" (p. 196). Hester makes all of the overt suggestions about fleeing the settlement and retreating to Europe; and she offers to accompany him. He accepts.

Indeed, it is not only Dimmesdale's weakness and Hester's strength that make it appear that Hester's will guides this scene; even the narrator prods the reader toward this conclusion. We are told that they shared "their real thoughts" (p. 190), that "[h]ere, seen only by her eyes, Arthur Dimmesdale, false to God and man, might be, for one moment, true!" (p. 196). The narrator tells us that Hester's long sojourn wearing the scarlet letter had made her a critic of "human institutions, and whatever priests or legislators had established" (p. 199), preparing her to defy moral and civil law; but Dimmesdale, though he sinned once, has always since remained "hemmed in" by "the framework of his order" (p. 200).

Thus, we seem to see that, as regarded Hester Prynne, the whole seven years of outlaw and ignominy had been little other than a preparation for this very hour. But Arthur Dimmesdale! Were such a man once more to fall, what plea could be urged in extenuation of his crime? ...The struggle, *if there were one*, need not be described. Let it suffice, that the clergyman resolved to flee, and not alone.(pp. 200-201, my emphasis)

All of these factors have led critics to believe that in the forest scene Dimmesdale is "seduced" by Hester,¹⁵ but closer attention to who says what to whom reveals that Dimmesdale, not Hester, is in control here. It is true that the minister is physically weak and hypersensitive, and that he cannot control his cowardice or his fear, but, as the narrator tells us, ever since committing his one sin, Dimmesdale has found his "acts ... easy to arrange" (p. 200).

It will be useful in the discussion below to divide the interview in the forest into three parts. The first part begins with Dimmesdale's entrance on the scene and ends with the revelation of Chillingworth's identity; the second part includes the decision to flee and ends with Hester casting away the scarlet letter and calling Pearl to join them; and the third part centers on Pearl and ends with the minister's departure.

Dimmesdale enters the scene with "a nerveless despondency in his air, which had never so remarkably characterized him in his walks about the settlement, nor in any other situation where he deemed himself liable to notice" (p. 188). When Hester calls his name, he responds by "[g]athering himself quickly up" and standing "more erect, like a man taken by surprise in a mood to which he was reluctant to have witnesses" (p. 189). In short, Dimmesdale enters unselfconsciously, without a false face, and he can be seen to be weak, possibly on the verge of death. But he *instantly* puts on a public façade. It is unclear whether he maintains a façade through the interview. Probably he lets it drop for a short while, for he and Hester go into "the shadow of the woods" together "[w]ithout a word more spoken,--neither he nor she assuming the guidance, but with an unexpressed consent" (p. 190). At any rate, it is clear that he is capable of putting on an act, and that such has become habitual with him.

The conversation starts with "remarks and inquiries such as any two acquaintance[s] might have made, about the gloomy sky, the threatening storm, and, next, the health of each" (p. 190).

After a while, the minister fixed his eyes on Hester Prynne's."Hester," said he, "hast thou found peace?"She smiled drearily, looking down upon her bosom."Hast thou?" she asked."None!-- nothing but despair!" he answered.(pp. 190-91)

Dimmesdale goes on to pour out his heart to Hester about how miserable he is, about how he might have found peace "[w]ere I an atheist" (p. 191). She tries to comfort him by claiming that the people reverence him (p. 191), but he retorts that it only brings him more misery, that he has "laughed, in bitterness and agony

of heart, at the contrast between what I seem and what I am!" (p. 191).

Hester protests that his "present life is not less holy, in very truth, than it seems in people's eyes," that he has done penitence through his good works (p. 191), but Dimmesdale cries out that "[o]f penance I have had enough! Of penitence there has been none!" (p. 192). He says he envies her public shame and wishes that he had had "one friend,--or were it my worst enemy!--to whom ... I could ... be known as the vilest of all sinners" (p. 192).

In this first part, Dimmesdale holds sway in the conversation. He gives Hester the chance to unburden herself, knowing full well that she has prided herself these seven years in her stoic silence. Dimmesdale says (I think quite honestly) that he feels the need to be seen for what he is, and he manages to sermonize at length on all of his faults and all of the agony he has endured. Surely he finds some catharsis in this. But then Hester reveals that Chillingworth is her husband, changing dramatically the tenor of the conversation.

As the second phase of the conversation begins, Dimmesdale is stricken by the news of Chillingworth's true identity, and he claims that he cannot forgive Hester for keeping such a secret (pp. 192-94). But Hester, "[w]ith sudden and desperate tenderness," throws "her arms around him" and presses "his head against her bosom," begging forgiveness and holding him thus in spite of his struggles (p. 194). This is surely part of the "seduction," being the most overtly sexual act in the narrative.¹⁶

At length Dimmesdale forgives her, observing that Chillingworth is "worse than even the polluted priest," for he

"has violated, in cold blood, the sanctity of a human heart. Thou and I, Hester, never did so!" "Never, never!" whispered she. "What we did had a consecration of its own. We felt it so! We said so to each other! Hast thou forgotten it?" "Hush, Hester!" said Arthur Dimmesdale, rising from the ground. "No; I have not forgotten!" (p. 195)

Thus Dimmesdale silences Hester's reminiscence about their passion, and the two linger silently, claiming "another, and another, and, after all, another moment" (p. 195). The silence is broken when Dimmesdale

started at a thought that suddenly occurred to him. "Hester," cried he, "here is a new horror! Roger Chillingworth knows your purpose to reveal his true character. Will he continue, then, to keep our secret? What will now be the course of his revenge?" (p. 196)

This is Dimmesdale's ongoing dilemma. His deepest desire is to be seen as what he is, and yet he finds it horrible to think that Chillingworth might reveal the secret. As in the first scaffold scene, he wants to be revealed but in his cowardice he shrinks from the prospect.

Hester replies "thoughtfully" that she deems it "not likely that he will betray the secret" (p. 196), and it appears from here on that Hester is in charge--making the decisions, talking Dimmesdale into running away, seducing him into a sin, not of passion (as was their adultery), but of reason and will.

But Dimmesdale, in fact, subtly guides the direction of the conversation. Immediately after Hester tells him that Chillingworth "will doubtless seek other means of satiating his dark passion" than betraying their secret, the minister exclaims,

"And!--how am I to live longer, breathing the same air with this deadly enemy? ... Think for me, Hester! Thou art strong. Resolve for me!" (p. 196)

Surely it would be ingenuous of us to take this as anything but a rhetorical question; Dimmesdale has clearly suggested precisely what Hester should resolve for him, and Hester gives the only appropriate answer: "Thou must dwell no longer with this man" (p. 196). Henceforward, Dimmesdale continues to hold the reins,

guiding her to say just what he wants to have said, just what a woman of Hester's passion and strength and antinomian tendencies is likely to say. To continue under the same roof as Chillingworth, he says, would be

"far worse than death! ... But how to avoid it? What choice remains to me? Shall I lie down again on these withered leaves, where I cast myself when thou didst tell me what he was? Must I sink down there, and die at once?" "Alas, what a ruin has befallen thee!" said Hester, with the tears gushing into her eyes. "Wilt thou die for very weakness? There is no other cause!" "The judgment of God is on me," answered the conscience-stricken priest. "It is too mighty for me to struggle with!" "Heaven would show mercy," rejoined Hester, "hadst thou but the strength to take advantage of it." "Be thou strong for me!" answered he. "Advise me what to do." (p. 196)

How else can Hester answer? Dimmesdale has shown that staying with Chillingworth will be his death. If remaining means death, what other option is there? She passionately argues that he flee, that he can find happiness and success in the Old World (p. 197). And in response he speaks honest but surely profoundly manipulative words:

"O Hester! ... thou tellest of running a race to a man whose knees are tottering beneath him! I must die here. There is not the strength or courage left me to venture into the wide, strange, difficult world, alone!" ... He repeated the word. "Alone, Hester!" (p. 198)

Again, how else could Hester, who has endured seven years of public ignominy for the love of this man, respond? "Thou shalt not go alone!" answered she, in a deep whisper" (p. 198). Now Hester has "spoken what he vaguely hinted at, but dared not speak" (p. 199).

Dimmesdale feels "a glow of strange enjoyment" (p. 201) once the decision is made, and proclaims, "This is already the better life! Why did we not find it sooner?" (p. 202), to which Hester replies

"Let us not look back ... The past is gone! Wherefore should we linger upon it now? See! With this symbol, I undo it all, and make it as it had never been!" So speaking, she undid the clasp that fastened the scarlet letter, and, taking it from her bosom, threw it to a distance among the withered leaves. (p. 202)

It is with this action that the second phase of this conversation ends. In the first two parts of the conversation, Dimmesdale has had his way, first unburdening himself on Hester and then prompting her to convince him to flee. When Hester casts aside the scarlet letter and calls for Pearl to join them, a quite different conversation begins.

If the first phase of this conversation is about Dimmesdale's ongoing misery and the second about a solution to the problem, the topic of the third phase seems to be how (or if) the three will be able to form a family. Hester insists that the minister will love Pearl, but Dimmesdale says that he shrinks from children, including Pearl, and that children do not seem to like him (pp. 203 and 206). Although both comment on Pearl's physical resemblance to the minister (p. 206), this phase of the conversation seems to foretell that family life for the three of them will be difficult at best, for Dimmesdale dreads the encounter, and when he kisses Pearl's brow, the child darts off and washes the kiss away in the brook (pp. 212-13).¹⁷

The rest of the conversation is glossed quickly:

[T]hey talked together, and made such arrangements as were suggested by their new position, and the purposes soon to be fulfilled. And now this fateful interview came to a close. (p. 213)

In the end, I think that Dimmesdale has scored a remarkable success in this episode. For seven years his primary concern has been maintaining his face--"the positive social value a person effectively claims for

himself."¹⁸ The minister knows full well that "while his social face can be his most personal possession and the centre of his security and pleasure, it is only on loan to him from society; it will be withdrawn unless he conducts himself [or *seems* to conduct himself] in a way that is worthy of it."¹⁹ It is important to note that self-image and face need not be congruent; if anyone is an example of this, it is Dimmesdale. The minister is so weakened and worn out that it is becoming impossible for him to maintain his false public face before his entire congregation; in the forest, he decides to circumscribe his audience. Instead of adjusting his face, he adjusts his society, making it a society of two--Hester and himself. In the forest he manages to maintain his face by getting Hester to talk him into fleeing; by doing so, his identity in this dyad remains that of a man seduced, taken advantage of by a strong, passionate woman in spite of his better self. We know, and Dimmesdale knows, that he *has* no better self. He *is* the sinner he thinks he is, but he manages to maintain the social fiction that he is merely weak.

Dimmesdale also scores a serendipitous victory in the forest. As it turns out, the ship upon which they will flee is not due to sail until "the fourth day from the present." Dimmesdale thinks this "most fortunate" (p. 215) because

on the third day from the present, he was to preach the Election Sermon; and, as such an occasion formed an honorable epoch in the life of a New England clergyman, he could not have chanced upon a more suitable mode and time of terminating his professional career. "At least, they shall say of me," thought this exemplary man, "that I leave no public duty unperformed, nor ill performed!"(p. 215)

In short, though he knows it will not last, Dimmesdale is very hopeful of maintaining, and even bettering, his public face when he preaches the Election Sermon.

Dimmesdale in the forest, then, is not a different man--defeated by self-torture, helpless in the face of Hester's passion--than he has been throughout the story. He is not, that is to say, an *utterly* different man, for he is still playing pragmatics and semantics off against each other, saying, "I can't flee alone," and meaning, "Flee with me." But he has changed in this scene by making a more public acceptance of his status as sinner and deciding at last to do something other than continue in his suffering. He has decided, in effect, to confess unambiguously to the people of Boston that he has something to hide, and only the most priest-ridden among them would be unable to discern the nature of that something when the minister, Hester, and Pearl all disappear on the same day. He has decided to reveal his sin to the public without facing the public.

Following Dimmesdale's return from the forest, the narrative can be divided into two parts: Dimmesdale's transformation as he re-enters Boston, followed by his Election Sermon and subsequent final confession and death. My interpretation of the forest scene suggests that his transformation and final confession do not, indeed, mark a profound change, a *metanoia*, for the minister, but are only slight variations on the same morally deficient theme he has played these seven years.

The aftermath of the interview in the forest shows the beginning of Dimmesdale's transformation. The moment after he makes the decision to flee, "a glow of strange enjoyment threw its flickering brightness over the trouble of his breast. 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. His spirit rose, as it were, with a bound" (p. 201). As he leaves the forest, Dimmesdale discovers he has "unaccustomed physical energy," and he can traverse the woods "with an unwearable activity that astonished him." He also finds that the town gives him "an impression of change" (p. 216). The symptoms of Dimmesdale's transformation--a feeling of renewal, increased energy, a sense of giddiness and euphoria--are very like the symptoms of a man who has just fallen in love or has just been unexpectedly released from prison. I suggest that Dimmesdale's exhilaration is due to a sudden sense of his own power. Up to this point, he had used his speaking ability to maintain the status quo, to disguise his sin and merely escape

punishment. But in the forest his powers of persuasion have allowed him to create a new future for himself, to release himself from his bonds. He is not changed, but his relationship to the world is; he has lived in fear of discovery, but now he has a sense of his own power to control and manipulate people, rather than merely to maintain a façade.

There follows a very odd sequence of events in which Dimmesdale is tempted, again and again, to speak wickedly. He is tempted to utter "certain blasphemous suggestions that rose to his mind, respecting the communion-supper" to a "venerable," "upright and holy" old man (pp. 217-18); he almost whispers in the ear of a "poor, widowed, lonely" old dame "a brief, pithy, and, as it then appeared to him, unanswerable argument against the immortality of the human soul" that would probably "have caused the aged sister to drop down dead, at once" (pp. 218-19); upon seeing a "maiden newly won" (i.e., converted), he feels "potent to blight all the field of innocence with but one wicked look, and develop all its opposite with but a word" (pp. 219-20); he has an impulse to "teach some very wicked words to a knot of little Puritan children who were playing there, and had just begun to talk" (p. 220); and finally he wants to trade some "improper jests" and "a volley of good, round, solid, satisfactory, and heaven-defying oaths!" with a drunken seaman (p. 220).

These temptations seem slightly less comical as Hawthorne presents them, and it is important to note that though he is tempted, Dimmesdale does not succumb. The nature of his temptations is revealing: he is tempted to use his powers of speech toward evil ends. There is no evidence that he has ever been so tempted before. In the forest, Dimmesdale has loosed his tongue from its social constraints, and when he re-enters the town he is hard-pressed to rein it in again. He is exulting in his newly-realized powers of speech and must struggle to keep them in check.

But the most curious effect of the forest interview is yet to follow. Dimmesdale eats "with ravenous appetite," burns the few pages of the Election Sermon he had already begun, and, with "an impulsive flow of thought and emotion," writes through the night, completing his new Election Sermon at sunrise (p. 225).

This burst of energy and eloquence, matching the vigor he has felt since leaving the forest, is perhaps not curious; what seems strange is that the Election Sermon, which we will see to be profoundly pious and moving, is written by a man flushed with his sin. As Frederick C. Crews points out, "Dimmesdale has undergone no discernible change in attitude from the time of his eccentric impulses in the street until the writing of the sermon ... In short, the Election Sermon is written by the same man who wants to corrupt young girls," not to mention old men, old women, toddlers, and sailors.²⁰

All of Dimmesdale's sermons have been effective, but the townspeople will agree that the Election Sermon is the best: "never had man spoken in so wise, so high, and so holy a spirit, as he that spake this day" (p. 248); it is evident that Dimmesdale is inspired.

How can we reconcile Dimmesdale's new-found life of sin with his tremendously pious and effective sermon? There is really no contradiction here at all. Dimmesdale has always been acutely aware of his own sinfulness, and that has not kept him from being an effective preacher to date. The real difference in the Election Sermon stems from its importance in Dimmesdale's career. As Terence Martin puts it, Dimmesdale sees the chance to make his Election Sermon "the final, the greatest, the ultimate, sermon."²¹ Dimmesdale has, through enormous pain, maintained his image as a saintly preacher; his Election Sermon is his (last) chance to make the best of good impressions--which is, after all, what he has been striving for all along.

Following the Election Sermon, Dimmesdale, somehow aware that his last hour is upon him, leads Hester and Pearl to the scaffold and makes his final confession before all the people of Boston. But though his publicly uttered words from the scaffold are impassioned and clearly gush forth from a wounded heart, Dimmesdale never manages to say, "I am Pearl's father." Instead he speaks of a scarlet letter worn by another "in the midst of you," whom the minister goes on to speak of as "him" (p. 255). Dimmesdale, who all along has demonstrated an uncanny ability to manipulate words and appearances and contexts so that his

audience will hear what he *says* rather than what he *means*, confesses in such a way that many of the witnesses of the event can claim that the minister had never made any confession, but had simply "made the manner of his death a parable, in order to impress on his admirers the mighty and mournful lesson, that, in the view of Infinite Purity, we are sinners all alike," all the while retaining in the eyes of these "highly respectable witnesses" the image of being "the holiest among" them (p. 259). As John Gerber observes, after the scaffold confession, the people of Boston "forget the sin and dwell upon the nature and cause and greatness of the minister's expiation. Had he lived, they might have revered him the more."²²

Even the seemingly incontrovertible evidence of the scarlet letter burned on the minister's white chest, exposed for all to see, fails to get the point across. If ever pragmatics and semantics can agree, it is in the message of that scar, the "A" standing for Dimmesdale's adultery, its color and position and the mode of its revelation indicating clearly that his adultery and Hester's were one in the same.²³ But the same pious folk who hear no confession see no letter (p. 259).

Did Dimmesdale intend to confess and fail only because some members of his audience were too convinced of his piety to hear his confession? Or did he intend his last public words to be ambiguous? I cannot answer these questions; but what is clear is that Dimmesdale's habit of doubletalk was with him to the end. He clearly intended to go out with a flourish, to be remembered (social face always was of paramount importance to him), and in this he succeeded.

Dimmesdale's last private words are to Hester. When she asks him if they will meet in Heaven, he responds, "with tremulous solemnity,"

"Hush, Hester, hush! ... 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! He hath proved his mercy, most of all, in my afflictions. By giving me this burning torture to bear upon my breast! By sending yonder dark and terrible old man, to keep the torture always at red-heat! By bringing me hither, to die this death of triumphant ignominy before the people! Had either of these agonies been wanting, I had been lost for ever! Praised be his name! His will be done! Farewell!" (pp. 256-57)

What are we to make of this? We could, uncharitably, say that Dimmesdale is taking his last chance to put himself above Hester, that he is claiming his torture has been worse than hers.²⁴ But I would prefer to respect the solemnity and sincerity traditionally accorded dying words and believe that here Dimmesdale is speaking from his truest heart. Indeed, it is only by understanding that Dimmesdale deeply regrets his sin that his doubletalk and continued agony make sense. Perhaps particularly revealing here is the first sentence, for Dimmesdale has hushed Hester once before--in the forest, in response to her whisper, "'What we did had a consecration of its own. We felt it so! We said so to each other! Hast thou forgotten it?'" (p. 195).

These two moments of Dimmesdale's silencing Hester point to a fundamental difference between Hester and Dimmesdale. Dimmesdale can preach one thing and be another; he can commit adultery in the heat of passion and continue as a minister; but he cannot bear to be drawn into antinomian utterances. In the forest he only reluctantly admits that he remembers having said those words, and on the scaffold he will not tell Hester that he will see her in Heaven. Hester is forced by her society to display her guilt (in the form of the scarlet letter) though she does not really believe she has sinned; Dimmesdale hides his guilt though he has accepted his society's definition of his action as sinful. Hester is defiant of society even as she adheres to its strictures; Dimmesdale is so cowed by his society that he is unable to live up to its (and his) standards.

Dimmesdale is caught in a dilemma: he values both his social face and his immortal soul, but he cannot save

one without losing the other. His inner torment springs from this dilemma, and his effort to serve two masters leads him into continual doubletalk and makes his life an ongoing deception. His dual values split his speaking in twain and slowly tear him asunder.

Notes

1. This is a substantially different version of a paper which was first presented at the American Folklore Society national meeting in October 1989 and appears in my doctoral dissertation ("Speech and Moral Character: A Study of Selected Preachers in Nineteenth Century American Literature," diss., Indiana University, 1991).
2. Michael J. Colacurcio, "Footsteps of Ann Hutchinson: The Context of *The Scarlet Letter*," *ELH* 39 (1972): 491; Terence Martin, *Nathaniel Hawthorne*, revised edition (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983), p. 121.
3. Darrel Abel, *The Moral Picturesque: Studies in Hawthorne's Fiction* (West Lafayette: Purdue Univ. Press, 1988), pp. 238, 239.
4. The phrase is from John C. Gerber, "Form and Content in *The Scarlet Letter*," *New England Quarterly* 17 (1944): 25-55. Both Gerber and Abel overtly claim that Hester is the "activating agent" in the forest scene.
5. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (Columbus: The Ohio State Univ. Press, 1962 [1850]), p. 65. Further references to the Centenary Edition will be provided in the text.
6. "[P]ublic confession was required by both church and state for a variety of sins and crimes in the Massachusetts Bay Colony from the very beginning;" confession was "an essential of church discipline and civil law." Ernest W. Baughman, "Public Confession and *The Scarlet Letter*," *New England Quarterly* 40 (1967): 533, 540.
7. Martin, p. 112.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 112-13.
9. Nina Baym, *The Scarlet Letter: A Reading*, Twayne's Masterwork Studies 1 (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986), p. 18.
10. William H. Nolte, "Hawthorne's Dimmesdale: A Small Man Gone Wrong," *New England Quarterly* 38 (1965): 173, emphasizes Nolte's.
11. Baym, p. 18.
12. Stephen C. Levinson, *Pragmatics* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1983), p. 99.
13. There are many religious traditions in which the impact of preaching normally comes from emotion, but Puritanism is not one of them; see Eugene E. White, "Puritan Preaching and the Authority of God," *Preaching in American History*, ed. DeWitte Holland, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), pp. 36-73.
14. See J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1962) and John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969).
15. Colacurcio, p. 491; Martin, p. 121. Not all critics comment in so many words on who is to blame for what happens in the forest, but all of the interpretations I have encountered lean in this direction.
16. But it is not the most seductive act, which, to me, is Hester's casting away of the scarlet letter and

unloosening of her hair, which restores "[h]er sex, her youth, and the whole richness of her beauty" (p. 202). But this takes place *after* the decision to flee has been made.

17. Pearl often shows a disturbing insight concerning the minister, more than once expressing a desire that he stand with Hester and Pearl in public (pp. 153 and 212) and associating Hester's scarlet letter with Dimmesdale's habit of keeping his hand over his heart (pp. 180-81). Just as the impious Chillingworth is not blinded by the veil of piety that Dimmesdale pulls over his words, so the semi-socialized Pearl is not yet fluent enough in social conventions to be distracted by the minister's publicly-accepted façade. She is like the child who can see that the emperor has no clothes, as, perhaps, are the other Puritan children Dimmesdale fears.

18. Erving Goffman, "On Face-Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interactions," *Where the Action Is* (London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1969), p. 3.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

20. Frederick C. Crews, *The Sins of the Fathers: Hawthorne's Psychological Themes* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), p. 147. Crews sees a newly-released Id as the source of Dimmesdale's temptations; but while a freed sexuality might account for Dimmesdale's actions towards the maiden, it does not go far to explaining his impulses towards the others.

21. Terence Martin, "Dimmesdale's Ultimate Sermon," *The Arizona Quarterly* 27.3 (1971): 235.

22. Gerber, p. 54.

23. This is all assuming, of course, that there *was* a letter on Dimmesdale's chest, which is unclear from the text. At any rate, if there is no letter, there is also no confession.

24. Edward Davidson reads these words as evidence of Dimmesdale's persistent solipsism; "Dimmesdale's Fall," *New England Quarterly* 36 (1963): 369.

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