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Vengeance and Forgiveness in *The Scarlet Letter*

Everybody feels anger or vengeance towards another person at some point in his or her life, but how far can vengeance drive people? In *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, the characters are faced with a timeless situation that forces the characters to be full of vengeance and to lack forgiveness. The townspeople's vengeance towards Hester causes her and her daughter, Pearl to have to live abnormal lives alone and full of shame. Chillingworth's inability to forgive Reverend Dimmesdale eventually takes a toll on Dimmesdale's physical and mental health, and makes Chillingworth withered down to a man only alive to seek revenge.

The first repercussion of Hester's sin of adultery is that she is put on the scaffold in front of the entire town for everybody to mock. The townspeople's reactions are full of anger and vengeance. The women in the town are the harshest because they feel the effect of Hester's sin the most. Hester represents the women in the town and her sin exposes the fact that the women are all sinful too. One older woman says, "This woman has brought shame upon us all and ought to die" (5). This particular woman, who most of the other women agree with, feels that Hester has made a bad name for all of the women in town. The women are all embarrassed for Hester's sin, which makes them angry.

The townspeople not only show their vengeance when Hester is on the scaffold, but they subject her to it in her daily life: "Clergymen paused in the street to address words of exhortation that brought a crowd, with its mingled grin and frown" (38). They have made Hester and Pearl

outcasts by gossiping and treating them differently in public. The townspeople see their own sin in Hester, just like the women at the scaffold did, and feel they must punish her for that as a way to punish their own sin.

The years of vengeance towards Hester changes her. Hester is plain, passionless, and even mechanical after the years of vengeance. She has gotten rid of everything passionate about herself and has started to think a lot: “Her life had turned...from passion and feeling to thought” (116). The townspeople react to the way Hester is “...so ready...to give of her little substance to every demand of poverty” (112). The townspeople have begun to forgive Hester for her sin because of all the charity she does. Instead of her “A” meaning adultery, the townspeople “said that it meant ‘Able’” (113). The new forgiveness and understanding from the townspeople, though, is not nearly enough to change Hester back to the way she was before the sin. Hester continues to live alone without any companionship or passion.

Unlike the townspeople, Chillingworth does not react to Hester with forgiveness. When he first sees Hester on the scaffold he holds his finger to his lips (14) because he does not want anybody to find out that he and Hester are married. He is ashamed to be married to her, and this is where a part of his vengeance comes from. Chillingworth also feels like he is responsible for Hester’s sin. When the two talk in the prison Chillingworth tells Hester, “Mine was the first wrong, when I betrayed thy budding youth into false and unnatural relation with my decay” (27). Chillingworth feels he is responsible because he took Hester’s youth away and because he left her alone for so long. Chillingworth feels hate towards himself now because not only does he feel guilty for marrying Hester, he feels guilty for her sin. This self-hate leads Chillingworth to become consumed with vengeance towards Dimmesdale, who committed the sin with Hester.

Chillingworth’s obsession with taking vengeance on Dimmesdale consumes him with the

idea of torturing Dimmesdale. Chillingworth and Dimmesdale move in together, which allows Chillingworth to be closer to Dimmesdale. Chillingworth spends all of his time and energy on revenge and trying to make Dimmesdale miserable. He questions Dimmesdale so much that at one point, Dimmesdale was “gripping hard at his breast, as if afflicted with an importunate throb of pain” (84). Chillingworth accomplishes his goal of torturing Dimmesdale, but he has made himself miserable. His appearance has changed so much from his desire for vengeance that Hester notices he is different. When she talks to him she “...was shocked...to discern what a change had been wrought upon him within the past seven years...the former aspect of an intellectual and studious man...had altogether vanished, and been succeeded by an eager, searching, almost fierce, yet carefully guarded look” (122). Living for revenge has made Chillingworth older and uglier, and he lives life only to seek vengeance.

The vengeance and the life he has made for himself has made Chillingworth unable to forgive Dimmesdale. Hester even gives Chillingworth an opportunity to forgive Dimmesdale when she says, “forgive, and leave his further retribution to the Power that claims it!” (128). Chillingworth is so caught up in getting back at Dimmesdale and has made his life only about revenge, that he can’t even consider forgiveness now. He tells Hester “I have no such power as thou tellest of me” (127). Chillingworth has turned into such a bitter, vengeful person that he has no ability to forgive.

This inability of Chillingworth to forgive leads to the death of himself and of Dimmesdale. Dimmesdale confesses and dies in front of the town because he has been tortured by his guilt and by Chillingworth’s vengeance. When Dimmesdale dies, there is a, “change which took place, almost immediately after Dimmesdale’s death, in the appearance and demeanor of Chillingworth” (215). Since Chillingworth has devoted his life to bringing down

Dimmesdale, there is no longer any reason for him to live if there is no Dimmesdale to torture. Chillingworth's being has become vengeance, and because there is no more vengeance after Dimmesdale dies, "All his strength and energy-all his vital and intellectual force-seemed at once to desert him...he withered up, shriveled away, and almost vanished from mortal sight" (215). The vengeance that makes up who Chillingworth is no longer needed, so Chillingworth is no longer needed.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, vengeance does nothing but create negativity for everyone involved. The vengeance towards Hester and Pearl from the townspeople causes them to have to live alone as outcasts. In an effort to bring down Dimmesdale, Chillingworth's vengeance not only does that, but causes both of them to die. The repercussions of vengeance in *The Scarlet Letter* show why it is important to forgive. Having vengeance and not showing forgiveness can lead to obsession with revenge, which is unhealthy for the body and the soul.