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"The Evil Side"

In *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Roger Chillingworth represents the evil and vengeful side of human nature in the book's allegory for Puritan society, which prevents society from succeeding.

Chillingworth is only immoral; Hawthorne never presents him as benevolent or offers him any redemption. Hawthorne introduces Chillingworth as Hester's husband, who only arranged to marry her to have someone to care for him and provide affection. Hester goes to New England before him so she can create a nice home for Chillingworth upon his arrival. When Chillingworth finally arrives and learns of Hester's adultery, Hawthorne instantly portrays him as devious and evil. Hawthorne describes Chillingworth's reaction to seeing Hester as "A writhing horror twisted itself across his features, like a snake gliding swiftly over them, and making one little pause, with all its wreathed intervolutions" (42). Hawthorne evokes the image of a snake, which is often associated with evil and slyness. Chillingworth is evil, and Hawthorne makes that evident throughout the book.

The only benevolent part of Chillingworth is the persona he puts on in order to hide his evil nature and intentions. Once Chillingworth learns of Hester's sin, his first instinct is to lie about his identity to the community and try to hunt down with whomever Hester has had an affair. The only time Hawthorne presents Chillingworth as good occurs when he acknowledges his responsibility for Hester's sin, saying to her, "We have wronged each other…I seek no vengeance, plot no evil against thee. Between thee and me, the scale hangs fairly balanced. But, Hester, the man lives who wronged us both!" (51-52). Chillingworth is a logical man who recognizes the nuance of blame in Hester's sin; however, he shows no sign of considering his decision to get revenge; it is purely an impulsive choice rooted in his evil nature. Chillingworth also knows he needs Hester's trust, so he makes it clear he means no harm. He is not trying to apologize; Chillingworth is protecting his interests. Hawthorne does present Chillingworth as good in the eyes of the community. To them, he is an educated doctor who volunteers to be the town leech out of his goodwill. Chillingworth is only good when it aids his malignant goals.

Chillingworth used to be someone who valued the pursuit of knowledge over everything else; however, his vengeful nature forced him to devote every ounce of his life to his new goal. The title "leech" that Chillingworth adopts has another meaning than just the town doctor. He is a leech on Dimmesdale. Chillingworth's goal is to enact revenge on Hester's partner, so once he gets the suspicion that Dimmesdale might be his target, he attaches himself to him, becoming the priest's physician. Then, just like a leech, Chillingworth becomes dependent on Dimmesdale, who has been suffering from the guilt of his affair, and the guilt has begun to manifest as an awful sickness. Chillingworth starts poisoning Dimmesdale under the guise of trying to cure him. From this point on, Chillingworth's sole focus is Dimmesdale; they spend almost every day together. When Chillingworth adopts this goal, "he chose to withdraw his name from the roll of mankind, and, as regarded his former ties and interests, to vanish out of life completely" (81). Chillingworth consciously decides to forget and move on from his old life and devote all his resources to revenge.

Chillingworth's sole purpose is vengeance on Dimmesdale, so Chillingworth has no reason to exist when that fails. During their time together, Dimmesdale's well-being continues to decay; meanwhile, Chillingworth remains physically healthy. Chillingworth has absolute power over Dimmesdale; however, this power depends on Dimmesdale's trust. When Dimmesdale learns Chillingworth's true identity and stops accepting the elixirs, Chillingworth loses a significant amount of power, but he still knows Dimmesdale's sin. So, when Dimmesdale publicly announces his sin, he has fully gotten rid of Chillingworth and cast away his leech. Dimmesdale's confession causes Chillingworth to change: "All his strength and energy - all his vital and intellectual force - seemed at once to desert him; insomuch that he positively, withered up, shriveled away, and almost vanished from mortal sight" (177). When leeches have no host, they die, which is what Chillingworth does.

Hawthorne crafts an allegory for puritan society throughout The Scarlet Letter; Chillingworth is a vital piece of this allegory; he is the part that proves it impossible. Chillingworth represents the evil and vengeful side everyone tries to hide. He exists purely to torture one man. Chillingworth is the kink in puritan society that they can never work out; he does not thrive despite the society; he thrives because of it. Chillingworth acts precisely like every other puritan; he puts on the guise of being a good person to achieve his ulterior motive. The puritans want to appear as part of the elect for social benefits, and Chillingworth wants to appear as a helpful doctor to enact his revenge. Chillingworth is not different from the puritans; he is one of them, and he is the reason their society will never be sustainable.

Work Cited

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. The Scarlet Letter. Boston: Dover Thrift Editions, 1994.