Inconsistent Identities in *The Scarlet Letter*

Whenever people present false versions of themselves, the truth is eventually revealed. In such cases, honesty is ultimately proven to be the best option. Those who fail to choose honesty suffer greatly. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne writes, “No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself, and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the true” (137). Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth all present false versions of themselves; in time, their true identities are revealed. Readers naturally sympathize with Hester because she is the most genuine. Dimmesdale and Chillingworth are far less appreciated because of the false ways they choose to present themselves.

Hester Prynne is guilty of many transgressions in *The Scarlet Letter*, but in almost every way she manages to remain true to herself. She never denies the sin of adultery, she wears the scarlet letter faithfully, and she takes her responsibility as Pearl’s mother very seriously.

Hester’s greatest lies both center on her relationships with Dimmesdale and Chillingworth. In refusing to reveal the identity of Pearl’s father, she denies Dimmesdale the opportunity to publicly atone for his greatest sin. This secret is bad, but the secret she keeps for Chillingworth is worse. When she finally reveals her husband’s identity to Dimmesdale, she feels terrible about her prolonged secrecy. “Truth was the one virtue which I might have held fast, and did
hold fast, through all extremity; save when thy good, - thy life, - thy fame, - were put in question...that old man! – the physician! – he whom they call Roger Chillingworth! – he was my husband!” (Hawthorne 125). Had Hester chosen to be honest with the man she loved, Chillingworth would not have had years to torture the young minister. Honesty is important to Hester, but she does not live honestly when it comes to Dimmesdale and Chillingworth.

Though Hester and the leading male characters are all dishonest to a degree, Hester clearly lives closest to the truth. “We meet our protagonists after their original sin has been committed and at the point where the improbable redemption is about to begin. Hester accepts punishment and begins a program of good works that makes her look like a reformed woman as well as a repentant one” (Erlich 167). Unfortunately, Reverend Dimmesdale is unable to do the same. “Dimmesdale foolishly tries to purify himself by self-torture and flagellation, again a private means of redemption, and one that he as a Calvinist knows cannot succeed” (167). The secret Hester harbors regarding Chillingworth is problematic, but it pales in comparison to Dimmesdale’s.

Dimmesdale is a respected leader in Puritan Boston. Members of the community look to him for guidance and believe he is the holiest person they know (Hawthorne 95). In secret, Dimmesdale punishes himself for his relationship with Hester (Hawthorne 96). His inability to publicly acknowledge his relationship with the woman he loves haunts him endlessly. Ultimately, it leads to his death. When the narrator describes Dimmesdale’s delayed confession, he explains that Dimmesdale’s farewell “came forth with the minister’s expiring breath” (Hawthorne 162). Dimmesdale’s attempt to wear one face in public and another in private costs him his life.
Throughout the entire novel, Dimmesdale lacks the strength to be honest with his Puritan community. Just as Hester is the least dishonest, she is also a necessary component of Dimmesdale’s final decision. Her eventual revelation regarding Chillingworth’s true identity leads Dimmesdale to tell the truth. Because of his new knowledge about Chillingworth, Dimmesdale puts himself in Hester’s hands and agrees to run off with her...Having decided on action of some sort, he naturally takes the next step and considers action of another sort – an action, after all, that he has wanted to take all along” (Sampson 512). Dimmesdale is a more dishonest character than Hester; he is unable to reveal his true identity until she uncovers her single secret and acts as his strength.

There is one character in The Scarlet Letter whose false identity is even worse than Dimmesdale’s. Roger Chillingworth is so disingenuous that readers never learn his real name. Immediately upon arriving, Chillingworth signals for silence from his young wife (Hawthorne 45). Hester agrees to keep his identity a secret, thereby committing one of her greatest sins. Years later, when she realizes what her husband is doing to Dimmesdale’s conscience, she begs him to tell the truth. He responds, “My old faith, long forgotten, comes back to me, and explains all that we do, and all we suffer. By thy first step awry, though didst plant the germ of evil; but since that moment, it has all been a dark necessity” (Hawthorne 113). Chillingworth is unable to acknowledge his responsibility for honesty, choosing instead to blame Hester for everything. Just as Dimmesdale’s lies cost him his life, so do Chillingworth’s. He dies within a year of Dimmesdale because his false identity no longer has a purpose (Hawthorne 164). Chillingworth maintains his secret identity throughout his time in Puritan Boston because he so desperately wants to torture Pearl’s secret father. In “Chillingworth as Miltonic
Satan,“ Abel argues that “The psychology of Chillingworth’s covert vengefulness toward his wife’s paramour, the minister Dimmesdale, is ambiguous, but its essential traits are distinguishable“ (73). He never intends to become an evil, malicious figure, but this does not excuse his deceitful behavior. Chillingworth spends the remaining years of his life morphing into a master of revenge, and he pays the ultimate price for this choice.

Honesty is important in all facets of life, and identity is no exception. Pretending to be someone else is undeniably problematic. Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth all reveal the truth of this in The Scarlet Letter. By denying her true relationships with Dimmesdale and Chillingworth, Hester limits her abilities to help either man. In refusing to publicly acknowledge his relationship with Hester, Dimmesdale dooms himself to a life of suffering and an untimely death. Chillingworth’s false identity as a knowledgeable physician allows him to torture Dimmesdale unrecognized, but it costs him his dignity and his life. All three characters learn a difficult lesson about “bewildered identities” over the course of the novel.

