

Marta Norkus

Ms. Kim

American Literature

17 May 2013

Fifty Shades of Scarlet

In our society, homosexuality is a prominent topic that the citizens cannot ignore, even if they tried. The United States is frequently getting exposed to the subject of homosexuality, whether it is for or against the matter. The legalization of same-sex marriage is becoming more common throughout the United States, Minnesota being the newest state. Even with all this support for gay marriage, there are still people who find homosexuality sinful and vile. Groups such as the Westboro Baptist Church go to dramatic measures to protest gay rights, like “demonstrating outside...the funerals of gay people” (Alvarez). Members of the Westboro Baptist Church believe homosexuality is a sin and they should be given the death penalty. Similarly, citizens of the Puritan society thought homosexuality was an act against God, and was an act punishable by death. The judgmental, heartless Puritan society is the setting for Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* where he contrasts the conservative ideas of the Puritans through his two sexually confused characters. The two main characters, Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth, struggle with their intimate feelings for each other and closet them away to escape the death penalty and the condemnation of Hell.

Roger Chillingworth’s romantic feelings for Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale are prominent during *The Scarlet Letter* through Chillingworth’s actions fueled by his obsessive love and jealousy. In the beginning of *The Scarlet Letter*, when apologizing to Hester Prynne for their

loveless marriage, Chillingworth justifies himself by telling her “[his] heart was a habitation large enough for many guests, but lonely and chill, and without a household fire” (69). Many women had been in Chillingworth’s life, yet none of them satisfied him because there was no spark. His longing for love keeps him searching for the perfect woman. Chillingworth originally thinks being married to Hester would satisfy his void. Unfortunately, even the young, beautiful Hester Prynne does not meet his desires. So, Chillingworth tries to fulfill himself through medical knowledge, which kept him content for a while. However, all the knowledge in the world could not fill the lonely pit of his heart. No woman or knowledge could ever satisfy Chillingworth because his heart had a longing for man named Arthur Dimmesdale.

Chillingworth’s yearning for Dimmesdale is unmistakable by the way he immediately returns to the village after being notified of Dimmesdale’s illness. Chillingworth’s love for Dimmesdale intensifies when Dimmesdale asks Chillingworth to move into his home. Chillingworth spends a majority of his time taking care of Dimmesdale and feels “a kind of intimacy...[grow] between [them]” (113). However, Chillingworth is not sure his feelings for Dimmesdale are mutual. Out of unwavering curiosity, Chillingworth ruthlessly questions Dimmesdale to display what is troubling his soul, believing what is upsetting Dimmesdale is his unnatural feelings for him. They get into a fight because Dimmesdale feels overwhelmed. Nevertheless, Dimmesdale, within a few hours, apologizes to Chillingworth and “it [proves] not difficult to reestablish the intimacy [between] the two,” demonstrating that Dimmesdale and Chillingworth deeply care about each other, and they cannot go more than a few hours without communicating (125). Moreover, Chillingworth is sexually attracted to Dimmesdale. While Dimmesdale is sleeping, Chillingworth sneaks into his room to “[lay] his hand upon his bosom, and thrust aside [Dimmesdale’s]

vestment” (126). When he removes Dimmesdale’s clothing, he is amazed by how sculpted Dimmesdale’s body is, and becomes astounded with joy. As the story progresses, Dimmesdale’s feelings for Chillingworth become more and more nonexistent due to his newly found emotions for Hester Prynne. Instead of respectfully letting go of Dimmesdale, Chillingworth becomes more fixated on him. Chillingworth finds out about Dimmesdale and Hester’s trip to Europe, and he decides to follow them uninvited, representing his everlasting love for Dimmesdale. However, before they can leave for Europe, after Dimmesdale’s speech, Dimmesdale becomes tremendously weak and he almost falls, but “[Chillingworth rushes] forward and [catches] the minister by the arm” (225). While holding Dimmesdale, Chillingworth can sense that Dimmesdale has lost his feelings for him, and has rekindled his love with Hester, so Chillingworth pleads to Dimmesdale to “wave back [Hester] and cast off [Pearl]” (225). Unfortunately for Chillingworth, Dimmesdale rejects him, and relies on Hester for support instead. When Dimmesdale dies, “Roger Chillingworth [kneels] down beside him, with a blank dull countenance, out of which the life seemed to have departed” (228). Chillingworth is depressed over Dimmesdale’s death and he eventually wilts away hoping to meet Dimmesdale in the afterlife to spend eternity together in the hell of homosexuality. Clearly, Roger Chillingworth’s love for the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale is presented throughout the entire novel.

Throughout the novel, Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale is seen oscillating between his homosexual feelings for Chillingworth and his heterosexual feelings for Hester. Dimmesdale begins to feel “a fascination for...[Chillingworth]” after Chillingworth moves into his home (112). When the two get into a fight over what is troubling Dimmesdale’s soul, Dimmesdale

“[loses] no time in making the amplest apologies,” demonstrating how Dimmesdale deeply cares about Chillingworth and how he cannot bare to see Chillingworth upset (125). Furthermore, Dimmesdale becomes infuriated when Hester tells him Chillingworth was her husband. He looks at her with “the violence of passion” and refuses to forgive her (175). Dimmesdale’s anger is driven by jealousy because of his longing to be married to Chillingworth. As the story advances, however, Dimmesdale, with the help of Hester, begins to realize Chillingworth isn’t the man who he originally fell in love with. He notices “there [is] something ugly and evil in [Chillingworth’s] face” (116). The ugliness and evilness displayed on Chillingworth’s face is created by his unhealthy obsession with Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth’s love cannot compare to the clarity of Hester’s. Dimmesdale becomes turned off by Chillingworth’s infatuated behavior and he rekindles his emotions for Hester. However, even though he chooses Hester over Chillingworth before he dies, Dimmesdale never fully decides between men or women. Dimmesdale “extends his hand to the woman of the scarlet letter” (226) towards the end, yet in the spiritual world, Dimmesdale and Chillingworth’s newly founded hatred might return to “golden love” (232). All in all, Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale battles between his feelings for both men and women throughout *The Scarlet Letter*.

Overall, during *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne portrays two men battling with their homosexuality to escape ridicule from their peers and God. Roger Chillingworth displays someone who is certain of his sexuality and is infatuated with another man, but is still afraid to openly express his feelings. Whereas, Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale demonstrates a man who is confused about his sexuality and which gender he is more attracted to. Nonetheless, they both share homosexual feelings for each other at one point in the novel. Nathaniel Hawthorne may

have crafted the sexual tension between Dimmesdale and Chillingworth because he had experienced homosexual feelings within his own life. Another anti-transcendentalist writer, Herman Melville, and Hawthorne would write letters back and forth. In one of the letters, Melville explains to Hawthorne that “with you for a passenger, I am content and can be happy” (Stuart). Clearly, Hawthorne and Melville deeply cared about each other and wrote to keep their relationship alive. Melville also wrote, in evaluation of Hawthorne’s *Mosses from an Old Manse*, that Hawthorne “[shot] his strong New England roots in the hot soil of my Southern soul” (Stuart). Even though Melville is discussing one of Hawthorne’s pieces, his review is really a colossal metaphor for their sex life. Perhaps, just as Hawthorne describes Puritan society in conflict with itself in *The Scarlet Letter*, through the characters of Dimmesdale and Chillingworth, he portrays his own rivalry with homosexuality.