

The Interview

Following her day of public humiliation, Hester is hysterical and in danger of hurting herself or her baby. To calm her down, the jailer brings a doctor, a man skilled in both Western and Native American medicine, into her cell. This man turns out to be the strange man Hester was watching in the crowd, her husband, Roger Chillingworth. When she sees his eyes, Hester is amazed to find them both familiar and “strange and cold.” This description of his eyes hints at Chillingworth’s negative function in the novel: His coldness will lead him to exact a chilly vengeance against Dimmesdale. From his discussion with Hester about medicine, the reader learns that Chillingworth was a student of alchemy in the Old World and has learned to use herbs in the new, which suggests his knowledge of esoteric, almost magical ways of healing. Although he separates himself from the powers of the Greek gods—he claims that he knows neither Lethe nor Nepenthe, which in Greek mythology are the waters that could lead to forgetfulness and banish grief—the recipe he has learned from the Native Americans is “as old as Paracelsus,” a medieval astrologer and alchemist. As in the previous chapter, Chillingworth is represented as inhabiting the border between two cultures: He understands ancient Western knowledge along with Native American methods. Although his efforts to relieve the suffering of Hester and her child seem admirable, readers might question the honesty of Chillingworth’s intentions: Is he preserving

Hester only because he wants to increase her suffering? Is he practicing humanitarianism or refined cruelty? As her husband, he is the person most deeply wronged by her adultery—does this give him the right to exact vengeance upon her? As the book progresses, the narrator will try to answer these questions through his depiction and analysis of Chillingworth's character. "Wherefore dost thou desire it?" inquired Hester, shrinking, she hardly knew why, from this secret bond. "Why not announce thyself openly, and cast me off at once?" "It may be," he replied, "because I will not encounter the dishonour that besmirches the husband of a faithless woman. It may be for other reasons. Enough, it is my purpose to live and die unknown. Let, therefore, thy husband be to the world as one already dead, and of whom no tidings shall ever come. Recognise me not, by word, by sign, by look! Breathe not the secret, above all, to the man thou wottest of. Shouldst thou fail me in this, beware! His fame, his position, his life will be in my hands. Beware!" "I will keep thy secret, as I have his," said Hester. "Swear it!" rejoined he. And she took the oath. "And now, Mistress Prynne," said old Roger Chillingworth, as he was hereafter to be named, "I leave thee alone: alone with thy infant and the scarlet letter! How is it, Hester? Doth thy sentence bind thee to wear the token in thy sleep? Art thou not afraid of nightmares and hideous dreams?" "Why dost thou smile so at me?" inquired Hester, troubled at the expression of his eyes. "Art thou like **the Black Man** that haunts the forest

round about us? Hast thou enticed me into a bond that will prove the ruin of my soul?" "Not thy soul," he answered, with another smile. "No, not thine!" *the Black Man*: the devil.

In this initial introduction to Chillingworth, the reader is led to sympathize with him. For example, Chillingworth immediately takes the blame for Hester's fall: He was too devoted to his studies and did not spend enough time with her; he was too old for a young girl; he was "misshapen" and, therefore, unattractive to her. Selfishly, he married her despite all these objections, because he wanted to create "a household fire" in his lonely life. His name suggests the impossibility of his efforts to find love with Hester: His chilly personality could never enflame this spirited younger woman. Even though she married him, Hester never pretended to love Chillingworth. In presenting Chillingworth's thoughts in this chapter, the narrative complicates the situation of Hester's adultery by emphasizing Hester's vulnerability and Chillingworth's recognition of his role in her downfall. There are no easy answers here; blame cannot be easily apportioned, despite the Puritans' efforts to divide the moral universe into clearly defined categories of right and wrong. When Hester admits she has wronged him, Chillingworth correctly posits that they have wronged each other. In some sense, his "decay" has betrayed her "budding youth." In these meditations, Chillingworth appears to be a thoughtful, reasonable man, one who will not seek senseless or violent retribution. But Chillingworth's generosity does not extend to the

father of Hester's baby. When Hester refuses to tell him the identity of this mysterious man, a more dangerous side of Chillingworth's personality emerges. As a man of science, Chillingworth believes that nothing can remain a secret if it is earnestly sought. Uncovering the seeming secrets of existence was his goal as an alchemist, and his goal now will be to find the solution to this mystery. Much like Hawthorne, Chillingworth plans to expose the secret workings of the heart. Chillingworth creates a link between his current project and reading: He will seek the man just as he has looked for truth in books. He will "read" the secret in this man's heart. The fact that the two men bear the same "sympathy" for Hester, they both love her, will offer Chillingworth additional help in discovering his identity. This is not a purely intellectual endeavor. Chillingworth will also read the adulterer's emotional and physical reactions—he will see him tremble and feel himself "shudder."

Hester is so convinced of her husband's powers that she fears he will read the secret written on her own heart. In Chillingworth's opinion, a visible sign, such as Hester's letter, is not necessary for revealing guilt: Our bodies themselves betray our shame. The penetrating power of his eyes indicates his ability to look beyond a person's physical body and into his interior psychology. Unlike the Puritans, Chillingworth will not exact his revenge on Hester's lover by public punishment, yet the man will still suffer. Perhaps this private punishment is actually more heinous than the overt penal machinery of

the Puritan colony. Hester seems to suggest that this is the case when she says Chillingworth's acts are merciful but his words show his true evil.

Sins confessed lose their terror. But secret sins have the ability to rip our souls to pieces. Chillingworth insists upon secrecy, upon the anguish inflicted on a guilty soul that is not allowed to confess its sins. He demands that Hester not reveal his identity to anyone in the community so that he will be effectively dead to the world. Having relinquished his identity, Chillingworth has virtually released all connections

with humanity: He is now free to pursue whatever actions necessary to solve the mystery of the identity of Hester's lover. He is now accountable only to himself.

Like the antinomians (see Chapter I commentary), Chillingworth tacitly rejects society's laws of ethics and creates his own law. In some sense, we can see a connection

between the actions of Hester and Chillingworth:

Like him, she rejected the laws of the Puritan colony and pursued an adulterous affair. But are there also differences between their actions? Hester's adultery was presumably based on a need for love and connection. (We can't say this for certain because Hawthorne does not give us any information about the past relations between Hester and Dimmesdale, although she must love him because she has kept his identity secret.) Chillingworth's vow to secretly uncover Hester's lover signals a rejection of connection: His goal is the destruction of a human soul, while her actions created one.

Although she accepts her husband's terms, Hester

recognizes the moral irresponsibility of his plan and believes that she is entering a devil's pact. In fact, she wonders if Chillingworth might be the "Black Man" himself,

a connection that will become more pronounced as the novel progresses. Here she also connects the devil with the forests that surround the city. For the Puritans, the natural world was not an idyllic haven but a place of evil and danger where one might encounter Satan.

Implicitly, Hester's words connect the devil with the Native American inhabitants of the forests. Indeed, the Puritans believed the natives were children of the devil, a racist idea that still haunts the relationship of Europeans and Native Americans.