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### The Scarlet Mask: Figurative masks within *The Scarlet Letter*

Every day, some people wake up and put on an invisible mask. This invisible mask represents how they want to be perceived by the world. In literature, some characters also wear this figurative mask. According to Sigmund Freud's tripartite model theory, this mask of strong morals would represent the superego, and the desires being masked would represent the id (Bressler 146). Individuals hide their secret thoughts and desires with a mask of strong morals. With some, this mask may be necessary to fit into the society they have chosen to live in. This is seen within the novel *The Scarlet Letter*. Nathaniel Hawthorne creates superego masks for his Puritan characters to wear. Some gladly wear the mask, others reject the mask, and still others try to reconcile between their desires and the societal expectations they choose to live within. Hawthorne shows in his novel that completely masking the id with the superego leads to destruction for the characters wearing the superego mask. It is only by balancing the wants of the id with the societal needs of the superego that the characters can be true and honest with themselves.

### **The Tripartite Model**

An individual's surrender to his deepest and darkest desires is destructive not only to that person, but to all individuals who in turn surrender. In Freud's theory, the id represents the "deepest, darkest wishes, and most intense fears" (Bressler 146). The id represents an individual's deep, private thoughts. Sometimes an individual can act upon on

those thoughts, giving into those dark wishes. According to Freud, when individuals act upon these thoughts, they are giving into the “pleasure principle,” the intense impulses and wants that a person can have (146). Carl Jung has a similar idea of the id, or the unconscious, as it is known in his work. Jung states that the unconscious is “everything which, involuntarily and without paying attention to it, I feel, think, remember, want and do” (401). Both of these theories of the id give a similar idea. If each individual were to act upon his or her unconscious feelings and give into an Id like state, the entire world would fall apart.

To ensure that the id does not reign supreme upon society, a moral regulation, the superego, must also be in place within the human psyche. According to Jung, it is because of the unconscious that the superego, or consciousness as he names it, is needed. He says the conscious “is like a child that is born daily out of the primordial womb of the unconscious” (Jung 394). The superego is the part of the mind that causes an individual to react to societal and moral rules instead of surrendering to the id. An individual gives into the “morality principle,” which acts as a censor to the id like tendencies the mind has to protect the individual and protect the community (Bressler 146). The superego, however, is extreme like the id, because if allowed to manifest itself completely, the superego can also bring a downfall, as the society working with the morality principle will punish those who give into the id, and those who do give in will feel guilt and fear because of the rules that society has passed (146).

The need for a balance between the unconscious Id and the conscious Superego creates the preconscious ego. The ego’s job is “to mediate between the instinctual desires of the id and the demands of social pressure issued by the superego” (146). An individual’s

ego recognizes the desires of the id and makes a decision based upon how the superego would react to those desires. The ego, therefore is the mediator, and is the ideal part of the human psyche, as the extreme sides of the id and superego are moderated.

### **The Shadow and the Figurative Mask**

By looking at the tripartite model, it becomes clear why individuals may have certain thoughts, but act in a completely opposite way from those thoughts. They may have id tendencies, but they may choose to react by balancing those tendencies with societal rules. They may even completely hide those id tendencies and the rationalizations of the ego by giving into the superego's morality principle and disguising with a figurative mask.

An individual's shadow is the outward appearance of that person's delve into the id. The shadow, according to Jung, is "that hidden, repressed, for the most part inferior and guilt-laden personality whose ultimate ramifications...comprise the whole historical aspect of the unconscious" (399). The shadow can "designate personal imperfections" which can be determined by an individual, but are more than likely the individual's imperfections as defined by his or her society (English 17). According to John English, a writer for the San Francisco Jung Institute Library, a person's shadow "is typically internalized by the rejected individual as a personal sense of personal shame and inferiority" (18). However, even if a person tries to hide these imperfections, and also the person's id tendencies, the hidden behaviors can still be manifested by the person's actions or even facial expressions. It always seems that the more people try to hide their guilt or envy, it becomes more and more apparent.

As a person's shadow becomes more evident, the person needs to be able to disguise those feelings behind a figurative mask. Just as the word figurative suggests, this disguise

that a person hides behind is not a literal mask, like a child would wear on Halloween. This mask is symbolic and it hides an individual's unconscious desires and the individual's true self. The mask is used to make the individual better fit for society, and the mask can differ according to which society he seeks to fit. According to Carl Jung, this mask is a persona, "the individual's system of adaptation to, or the manner he assumes in dealing with, the world" (Jung 397). This mask is an individual's desire to fit into the world that he lives in; it is not necessarily the person's actual personality, but is only society's idea of what and how the person should be. Jung says that the mask "is that which in reality one is not, but which oneself as well as others think one is" (397). Individuals have dissolved their true selves for something that they are not in order to become what society expects of them. Robert P. Craig, an assistant professor of cultural studies at the University of Houston says something similar. He says that wearing the figurative mask has two dangers for a person, the danger of never being the real self, and the danger of the mask becoming a habit and the belief that the person has actually come to be the mask (189). The figurative mask becomes less a necessity and more a danger, and can affect every aspect of an individual's life.

The person's mask may start off being figurative, but as the person continues to act according to society's rules, the mask stops being figurative and becomes literal. Individuals will act according to societal rules in order to fit into the society they have chosen. They will adopt certain ideas and opinions based upon the society and will live out those ideas in the form of a figurative mask. They hide their own unique ideals, disguising the ideals with what he or she thinks is appropriate. The mask starts off as just a reflection of the individual, his image of who society wants him to be (Elkins 736). Jung describes this as being a "danger...people become identical with their personas—the professor with his

text-book, the tenor with his voice” (397). The individual has become unrecognizable. By acting out the expected societal ideals, the person has become the beliefs the mask has been hiding. This is when the mask starts to not only symbolize the individual’s actions, but also his or her actual physical description.

### **Figurative Masking in *The Scarlet Letter***

The characters within *The Scarlet Letter* each represent a part of the tripartite model, which leads some of those characters to hide behind a figurative mask. The society in which these character’s live, a Puritan town in the early colonization of America, creates the moral superego mask that the characters deal with. It is because of the Puritan superego that Arthur Dimmesdale hides his sin behind a mask of morality, and that Roger Chillingworth is able to worm his way into the society in order to enact his revenge. It is because of the Puritan superego that Pearl is seen as an “airy sprite” (Hawthorne 84) as her actions reflect the id behaviors. It is because the superego that Hester Prynne must reconcile her guilt with her desire to live within the society she has chosen as she becomes the moderating ego.

*The Puritan Superego.* The New England, Puritan setting of *The Scarlet Letter* is what determines the morals and ideals that the characters use as a mask. The Puritans settled the New England area in the beginning of the 17th century, controlling that area with “religious thought and cultural patterns” (Kang 148). Puritans were expected to strive for moral purity, as Puritans believed that humans were “inherently sinful and corrupt” (149). It was believed that everyone, “no matter what good we might do, our hearts are full of evil and selfishness that can break out at any time” (Winship 13). The Puritans’ belief of humans being inherently sinful reflects the ideas behind the id and behind the shadow. The

Puritans believed that humans exhibited sinful behavior, irrational behaviors and imperfections, and that it was only through “severe and unremitting discipline” that they were able to achieve the purity they were seeking (Kang 149). It was also believed, by the New England Puritans, that “error must be opposed and driven up” giving the Puritans a tendency of intolerance (149). It was through the discipline that the need for the superego mask was necessary. The Puritans needed to hide those inborn, sinful, id-like behaviors so that they could prove themselves worth and pure. This need for purity is what drives the Puritan colony in *The Scarlet Letter* to impose superego ideals upon the characters.

In the novel, the townspeople hold the Puritan belief that disguising their sinful ways behind a pious mask is better than confessing and being deemed unworthy by their peers. Dimmesdale tells Chillingworth that there are those within his congregation that “bury their secrets thus” (120). He tells Chillingworth:

But, not to suggest more obvious reasons, it may be that they are kept silent by the very constitution of their nature. Or,—can we not suppose it?—guilty as they may be, retaining, nevertheless a zeal for God’s glory and man’s welfare, they shrink from displaying themselves black and filthy in the view of men; because thenceforward, no good can be achieved by them; no evil of the past be redeemed by better service. So, to their own unutterable torment, they go about among their fellow-creatures, looking pure as new-fallen snow while their hearts are all speckled and spotted with iniquity of which they cannot rid themselves (121).

For the Puritans, confessing to sin meant social exile, as is seen by the congregation’s actions towards Hester in the novel. It was better for them to go about “looking pure” (121)

than it was for them to confess their sins and become a social pariah. It is “the very constitution of their nature” (121), set forth by their religion, to wear the superego mask of piety and hide their id behaviors, their sin and guilt.

*Masking Guilt and Revenge.* The character of Arthur Dimmesdale hides his guilt behind his position as Reverend, which becomes his figurative mask. Dimmesdale is first introduced as the necessary spiritual guide for Hester as she stands upon the scaffold. Dimmesdale, although the partner in Hester’s sin, attempts to convince her to confess who was her “fellow-sinner and fellow-sufferer” (Hawthorne 63). This shows Dimmesdale’s superego masking. His plea to Hester to confess is his attempt to “hide a guilty heart through life” (63). By calling upon Hester to essentially name him as her “fellow-sinner,” he is still hiding behind his position as a Reverend. He claims that Hester has “wondrous strength and generosity” as she does not reveal his sin (64). He “drew back, with a long respiration” (64). Both of these examples show his relief that Hester has not named him, and that he is still able to hide his guilt and sin behind his position as Reverend. Dimmesdale’s superego mask reflects Jung’s idea that by acting out the societal ideals, the person becomes their mask (397). The Puritan town expects Dimmesdale to be their moral, spiritual leader. Because Dimmesdale has acted as their Reverend for so long, he is now only recognized by this mask. He is to them “a little less than a heaven-ordained apostle” (109). Although he does try later in the novel to convince the town that he is “a pollution and a lie...vile, a viler companion of the vilest, the worst of sinners, an abomination, a thing of unimaginable iniquity” (131), the congregation is still only able to see Dimmesdale as “a saint on earth” (131) as his previous hiding behind the superego mask has made it the only way he can be recognized. He has become the mask that he once hid behind.

Dimmesdale's declining health represents the disintegration of his figurative superego mask to reveal his id behaviors of sin and guilt. His description is that "his large dark eyes had a world of pain in their troubled and melancholy depth" (104). The pain that is seen within his eyes is not only physical pain, but is also the pain from the guilt he feels. His body and face become "emaciated" and his cheeks become pale (109). It becomes necessary for him to live with the physician Roger Chillingworth that the Reverend's health may be monitored (114). Dimmesdale's entire body is physically breaking down because of his guilt, "the anguish in his inmost soul" which has left "the undissembled expression of it in his aspect" (133). Dimmesdale's sickness disintegrates his superego mask, and he finds the need to show his sin and guilt, revealing his true visage, his true self.

Similar to Dimmesdale's superego mask, Roger Chillingworth also wears a mask of calm, collectiveness to hide his darkest id desires, revenge. Just as Dimmesdale's superego mask starts to disintegrate, Chillingworth's mask slips at certain times to reveal "something ugly and evil in his face" (116). As Chillingworth is introduced, he is described as being "calm and intent" (67). However, as he reveals to Hester his plans to seek her partner, to "see him tremble" (70), his image becomes so dark, that "Hester Prynne clasped her hands over her heart" (70). Chillingworth's mask only holds long enough for him to gain access into the community. Once he is in the position that he needs to be in to exact his revenge, the mask starts to come off. His superego mask, instead of being one of piety, reflects more the idea of intolerance that is also seen within the Puritan religion.

The Puritan beliefs behind marriage explain the necessity that Chillingworth finds to hide behind his mask, and his want for revenge. Amanda Porterfield, a professor of American Religion at Florida State University, says that within Puritan marriages, there



was a “sanctioned authoritarian behavior among husbands and also stressed the importance of willing consent among wives” (Porterfield 14). This idea helped fuel the Puritan idea of marital fidelity as the “primary expression of religious consciousness and the primary locus of social order” (14-5). It is because of these two ideas, the consent of a wife and the social status of having marital fidelity that leads Chillingworth to put on his mask, as he does not want to “encounter the dishonor that besmirches the husband of a faithless woman” (Hawthorne 71). Because of Hester’s sin, Chillingworth would also be scrutinized under the social stigma of adultery that Hester must live. It would also reveal how Chillingworth’s control over his wife was not enough to make Hester consent. These two ideas also explain Chillingworth’s desire for revenge. By making his wife enter into sin, her “fellow-sinner” has made a mockery of Chillingworth’s authority.

*The Sprite’s Shadow.* Pearl exemplifies the idea of rejecting the societal superego mask and living within the id. It is Hester’s fear within the novel that Pearl is her sin personified. Pearl is seen by Hester as having a “dark and wild peculiarity” (82), and Hester wonders throughout the novel if were actually an “airy sprite” instead of a “human child” (84). This is because Pearl does not exemplify the societal ideals of the Puritan town. Pearl has “outbreaks of fierce temper” (86) and continually exclaims that she does not have a Heavenly Father (90, 100). She claims rather to have come from her mother, which was quite against Puritan ideals of predestination. Because Pearl does not fit the Puritan ideals of a child, and because she vehemently rejects those Puritan ideals, she is in fact living with the id, giving into the deepest, darkest desires of her heart.

*Reconciling Sin and Society.* Hester’s search for reconciliation is the only true honest representation of character within the novel. Hester lives within the ego part of the human

psyche. She lives with a “daily shame [that] would at length purge her soul” (74). She recognizes that her past venture into the id has left her with a permanent punishment from the society she so desperately seeks to fit into. She seeks to have the “severe and unremitting discipline (Kang 149) so that she can return her “purity...that which she had lost” (74). Although she has been cruelly punished, forced to walk around with a physical representation of her sin emblazoned on her chest, she still wants to return to the community that punished her. Hester is balancing her id, her imperfections and desires, with the societal expectations surrounding her. By living within the ego, she is not reflecting the social image or her repressed feelings, but is revealing her true self.

### **Conclusion**

It may seem easy to argue that Hawthorne did not create masks for his characters to wear and to reject. His extreme detail to mannerisms and physical characteristics could simply have been meant for description and nothing else. But the combination of these attributes with his commentary of the Puritan ideals show his attempt to reveal that people will seek to fit within their chosen society by disguising their desires with the ideals of that society.

Just as some of the characters in this novel wear masks to fit within society, people in the modern world wear societal masks. They hide their own image, disguising it with the social norm and in some instances, the person can actually start to reflect those norms they are hiding behind. By looking at masking within *The Scarlet Letter*, it can be better understood why there is that desire to mask an individual's desires with the expectations of a society. By not masking, it could lead to the individual becoming a social pariah. But without the mask, the person is left only to his dark desires, which could be detrimental. It

is only by reconciling between the social mask and a person's desires that the true self is revealed.

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