Effects Of Sin In “The Scarlet Letter” Essay, Research Paper

In Adam”s fall, we sinned all.” This old Sunday-school saying applies well to Nathaniel Hawthorne?s characters in The Scarlet Letter. The main characters, Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale, Roger Chillingworth, as well as the townspeople, all sinned. The story is a study of the effects of sin on the hearts and minds of Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth. Sin strengthens Hester, humanizes Dimmesdale, and turns Chillingworth into a demon.

Hester Prynne?s sin was adultery. This sin was regarded very seriously by the Puritans, and was often punished by death. Hester?s punishment was to endure a public shaming on a scaffold for three hours and wear a scarlet letter “A” on her chest for the rest of her life in the town. Although Hawthorne does not pardon Hester?s sin, he considers it less serious than those of Dimmesdale and Chillingworth. Hester?s sin was a sin of passion. This sin was openly acknowledged as she wore the “A” on her chest. Hester did not commit the greatest sin of the novel. She did not deliberately mean to commit her sin or mean to hurt others.

Hester?s sin is that her passions and love were of more importance to her than the Puritan moral code. This is shown when she says to Dimmesdale, “What we did had a consecration of its own. We felt it so! We said so to each other!” Hester fully acknowledged her guilt and displayed it with pride to the world. This was obvious by the way she displayed the scarlet letter. It was elaborately designed as if to show Hester was proud.

Hester is indeed a sinner, adultery is no light matter, even today. On the other hand, her sin has brought her not evil, but good. Her charity to the poor, her comfort to the broken-hearted, her unquestionable presence in times of trouble are all direct results of her quest for repentance. Her salvation also lies in the truth. She tells Dimmesdale of Chillingworth?s real identity, having kept it a secret before, to aid in her salvation. Her pursuit in telling the truth is evident in the lines, ?In all things else, I have striven to be true! Truth was the one virtue which I might have held fast, and did hold fast, through all extremity save when thy good–the life–thy fame–were put in question! Then I consented a deception. But a lie is never good, even though death threaten the other side!?

Even though Hester?s sin is the one the book is titled after and centered around, it is not nearly the worst sin committed. Hester learns from her sin, and grows strong, a direct result of her punishment. The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread. ? Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers–stern and wild ones–and they had made her strong… ? Hester also deceived Dimmesdale, also committing the sin of deception. She swore to Chillingworth that she would keep their marriage a secret. She even withheld this from Dimmesdale, whom she truly loved. Hester finally insisted on telling Dimmesdale and clearing her conscience. In this passage, you can see how he grows angry at Hester: ?O Hester Prynne, thou little, little knowest all the horror of this thing! And the shame!–the indelicacy!–the horrible ugliness of this exposure of a sick and guilty heart to the very eye that would gloat over it! Woman, woman, thou art accountable for this! I cannot forgive thee!? Dimmesdale does forgive Hester. She has done the right thing in telling him. Her sin of deception is then lifted off her chest. Hester?s vow of truth is then kept.

Arthur Dimmesdale?s sin was the same as Hester?s. He is Hester?s silent partner in crime, the guilty one who has confessed nothing in order to save himself. Actually, Dimmesdale is a coward, a man who is too weak to confess his guilt, even though he desires to greatly. As a way of self-punishment, Dimmesdale has created a supposed “A” on his own chest by beating himself. Dimmesdale has committed the crime of hypocrisy. He is a minister and every week gets up on his pulpit to hear his congregation?s sins. Somehow, Dimmesdale is too weak to confess his own sin. By hiding it, his sin becomes even worse; it?s now a concealed sin. Dimmesdale pleads with Hester, while she is sentenced on the scaffold, to confess his guilt. ?I charge thee to speak out the name of thy fellow-sinner and fellow-sufferer! Be not silent from any mistaken pity and tenderness for him for, believe me, Hester, though he were to step down from a high place, and stand there beside thee on thy pedestal of shame, yet better were it so, than to hide a guilty heart through life. What can thy silence do for him, except it tempt him–yea compel him, as it were–to add hypocrisy to sin?? Dimmesdale?s guilt is overwhelming. He must act as if nothing has happened. He remains silent so that he can continue to do God?s work as a minister. Throughout the seven years of the novel, Dimmesdale?s sermons get more and more tantalizing the weaker he grows. He must wear one face for the world, another for himself. Dimmesdale is trying to excuse his behavior, when his soaring career may be a justification for concealing a sin. He is struggling to confess, and in each sermon, he comes closer and closer to doing so. He is also under pressure from Chillingworth, who has brought Dimmesdale almost to the point of insanity. His guilt is heightened when he sees Hester suffer alone with the sin he was a part of.

It seems to be Dimmesdale?s nature that has led him to be a coward. Speaking with Dimmesdale, you could discern his guilt in underlying meanings, or even directly, from what he says.? …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 among their fellow creatures looking pure as new-fallen snow while their hearts are all looking speckled and spotted with iniquity of which they cannot rid themselves. Dimmesdale?s triumphant day, when he finally confesses the truth, comes on Election Day. After giving the greatest sermon of his life, he climbs the scaffold. It is on the very scaffold that he first pleaded with Hester to reveal his identity that he now releases his secret. Chillingworth?s remarks show the importance of Dimmesdale?s confession: “Hadst thou sought the world earth over, there was no place so secret,–no high place not lowly place where thou couldst have escaped me,–save on this very scaffold!” I think Dimmesdale has not committed the worst sin of the book, even though he inflicted much pain onto himself over guilt and remorse. Hawthorne wanted to see what would happen if he created a character who struggled to hide a terrible sin deep in his heart, but also believed in a God that sees and loves the truth. This is what Arthur Dimmesdale thought and felt. His confession helped save his soul. Among many morals which press upon us from the poor minister?s miserable experience, we put only this into a sentence: “Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!”

Roger Chillingworth commits the greatest sin. At first glance, Chillingworth seems to be sinned against, not a sinner. His first sin is one against nature, and Hester more specifically. It was committed the day he married Hester. He knew she did not love him, and he was not fit to make her a proper husband. He did not wrong her on purpose. Chillingworth does look back and sympathize. ?It seemed not so wild a dream,–old as I was, and sombre as I was, and misshapen as I was,–that the simple bliss, which is scattered far and wide, for all mankind to gather up, might yet be mine. And so, Hester, I drew thee into my heart, into its innermost chamber, and sought to warm thee by the warmth which thy presence made there!? Chillingworth?s ignorance does not even excuse him. He sinned and knows it: “Mine was the first wrong, when I betrayed thy budding youth into a false and unnatural relation with my decay.” Hester knows he sinned also. She knew she was very young when she married him. His admittance to persuading her to be with him comes as no surprise to Hester. Chillingworth is a classic case of that sin Hawthorne developed called the “unpardonable sin.” For seven years, Chillingworth?s purpose is to search out and torment the man who has betrayed him. He has become a leech and sucks the life out of Dimmesdale. Vengeance is what he is obsessed with. In the process of carrying out his own vengeance, he destroys himself. He attempts to play God, and instead turns into a devil. A large number?…affirmed that Roger Chillingworth?s aspect had undergone a remarkable change while he had dwelt in town, and especially since his abode with Mr. Dimmesdale. At first his expression had been calm, meditative, scholar-like. Now, there was something ugly and evil in his face, which they had not previously noticed, and which grew still the more obvious to sight the oftener they looked upon him.? Hester begins to feel that Chillingworth?s transformation is her fault. He must assume the responsibility for having destroyed himself. It is he who surrendered his human sympathies in his quest for revenge. Chillingworth?s worst sin is violating the sanctity of the human heart. He suffers the most, dying shortly after Dimmesdale?s death. His vengeance was all that was driving him forward. It was his sole purpose for living. All his strength and energy–all his vital and intellectual force–seemed at once to desert him insomuch that he positively withered up, shrivelled away, and almost vanished from mortal sight, like an uprooted weed that lies wilting in the sun. This unhappy man had made the very principle of his life to consist of the pursuit and systematic exercise of revenge and when, by its completest triumph and consummation, that evil principle was left no further material to support it, when, in short, there was no more Devil?s work on earth for him to do so…

The townspeople made Hester?s situation even worse. They punished her for committing a sin, even though they committed sins themselves. The townspeople were then guilty of hypocrisy. The worst sin committed by the townspeople is the isolation they put Hester through. She was at a point where she would not go out in the daytime, just to avoid the people. Wearing her sin on her chest made the townspeople isolate her. They were all clear hypocrites for being the same people who went to church weekly, repenting their own sins. Nathaniel Hawthorne was immersed in sin, its wages, and the redemption of sin. Hawthorne was a Puritan descendant, a child to a strong tradition of sin. Puritan theology was based upon the conviction of sins.

The Scarlet Letter is a study of the effects of sin on the hearts and mind of each of Hawthorne”s characters. Hester and Dimmesdale seek redemption. Chillingworth, the worst sinner of the story, never seeks redemption. Hawthorne has written one of the first symbolic novels in American history. One of the most obvious symbols of sin in the story was Pearl. Pearl is the embodiment of her parents? sin. She is the incarnate of the letter “A” on Hester?s chest. Pearl also is Hester?s constant reminder that she has committed a great sin. Pearl almost seemed inhuman until the end of the novel. Lastly, I feel Hawthorne?s The Scarlet Letter is an almost historical novel of the Puritan society, and its conviction of sin, in his view and research.