How The Scarlet Letter Effects The Characters In The Book, The Scarlet Letter Essay, Research Paper

Everyone commits sins, but in the Puritan times, one was looked at as somewhat of a lower class if they committed the sin of adultery. Times have changed, and now the sin of adultery is more common and not as big of a deal, although it probably should be. Two people’s mistakes can effect many people in many different ways. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s, The Scarlet Letter is a book about a woman, Hester, who moves to Boston from England during the Puritan times. She has a husband, and tells the colonists of Boston he will be arriving to be with her soon. After years go by and he doesn’t arrive, Hester finds another man whom she becomes close to. She becomes pregnant and the town finds out she had committed adultery. She is forced to wear a letter “A,” meaning “adulteress,” on her bosom for the rest of her life. The book focuses mainly on the sin that was committed; it effected the whole community. The scarlet letter had one basic meaning, “adultery,” but to the characters of Hester and Dimmesdale it was a constant reminder of the sin; and to Pearl it was a symbol of curiosity.

Obviously, the scarlet letter had the largest impact on Hester, it was a constant reminder of the sin she committed. The “A” she must wear on her bosom completely humiliates her in front of everyone she meets, she begins to even hide behind it, trying to conceal her identity. Hawthorne is referring to Hester in the quote, “The unhappy culprit sustained herself as best a woman might, under the heavy weight of a thousand unrelenting eyes, all fastened upon her and concentred on her bosom” (55). Hester is doing everything possible from going completely crazy. So many people are staring at her as if she’s the most unfaithful, awful person in the world. She knows that she will never regain the respect she had before this incident. The scarlet letter she wears will constantly remind her and the townspeople that she is a sinner. While at Governor Bellingham’s mansion, Hester can’t help but notice while looking into the shining armor how much the “A” stands out. The “A” is seen “in exaggeration and gigantic proportions, so as to be greatly the most prominent feature of her appearance. In truth, she seemed absolutely hidden behind it” (102). Right then and there, she realized how much the “A” has become a part of her. She believes if the “A” becomes magnified in her reflection, the people who look at her must only notice the scarlet letter. She sees herself as if her true appearance is being hidden behind the “A.” She feels that no one looks at her anymore, just the letter. The scarlet letter has ruined her reputation, as well as her appearance. On Hester and Pearl’s way to Governor Bellingham’s mansion, Hawthorne talks about the way Pearl is dressed. Pearl was described as “the scarlet letter in another form; the scarlet letter endowed with life!” (98). Hester dresses her daughter up like the scarlet letter. Pearl’s dress matched the scarlet letter; it was a scarlet color with gold embroidering. Hester made the dress like that to prove that Pearl was the object of her affection. By looking at Pearl, Hester was also reminded of the guilt and torture she had been put through. Hester has no way to get rid of the guilt she felt for committing adultery because the result of the sin was Pearl.

In Dimmesdale’s mind, the “A” represents the guilt he feels for committing the sin. Dimmesdale knew what he had done was wrong and had no way to forgive himself for it. After Hester’s sin became public, the Reverend Dimmesdale would always hold one hand upon his bosom. Chillingworth became suspicious one day and thrust aside Dimmesdale’s vestment. Chillingworth then found out Dimmesdale also wears an “A” on his bosom. Dimmesdale was “conscious that the poison of one morbid spot was infecting his heart’s entire substance, attributing to all his presentiments to no other cause” (137). The “A” is described as the poison, which effects the morbid spot it is on, his heart. The “A” Dimmesdale and Hester wear constantly reminds them of the sin. He is a Reverend and that is against his morals, it makes him weak to even think he went against God. He gets weaker and weaker as time evolves and keeps his sin a total secret. As a way of trying to take away some of his guilt he goes to the scaffold Hester had stood upon, even though he knows, “If the same multitude which had stood as eyewitnesses

while Hester Prynne sustained her punishment could now have been summoned

forth, they would have discerned no face above the platform, nor hardly the

outline of a human shape, in the dark gray of the midnight. But the town was all

asleep” (143).

Somehow he thinks standing on the scaffold in front of no one will relieve a little bit of guilt. It was at night and even if people were there, it would be so dark they wouldn’t even be able to tell who he was. That is probably mainly why he’s doing that. He wants to get rid of his guilt without people finding out he is the father of Pearl. Being a Reverend who committed adultery, Dimmesdale’s chances of admitting to the crime and not receiving the death penalty are slim. That is probably one of the main reasons he’s not telling the town what he did. Another way of trying to relieve the guilt he has is by self-punishment. Dimmesdale even begins beating himself as a way to get rid of some guilt. He also begins all night vigils trying to ask for forgiveness. Years go by and Dimmesdale is soon going to die after all the things he put himself through; so on Election Day he tells the people of Boston that he is the father of Pearl and to prove it he, “tore away the ministerial band form before his breast. It was revealed!” (250). Dimmesdale knew he was going to die soon so he finally admitted to his crime. He didn’t want to die with his sins not told to the town. After years and years of keeping his guilt locked up inside of him, he finally releases it. It must have relieved him until the time he died. Seven years is a long time to keep a huge secret, he put himself through so much pain trying to make himself feel better, but in the end it ended up killing him.

Pearl has an idea of what the “A” means, but she is very curious and anxious to find out exactly what it means. Pearl is described as an unusually smart child. She doesn’t get along with any of the other kids and is always imagining things that are improper for such a little girl. Hester believes that Pearl is too young to find out the meaning of the scarlet letter yet. Hester was left in disbelief when Pearl answered Reverend Wilson’s question of how she was made, by saying she was, “plucked by her mother off the bush of wild roses that grew by the prison door” (108). Although Pearl supposedly knows nothing about the sin, she definitely lets everyone know she has somewhat of an idea about what happened. A little kid can’t just think up something like that, it had to be brought into their heads somehow. Maybe it was because she didn’t have a father figure and everyone else did; maybe it was because her mother wore a scarlet letter and no one else’s mother’s did. She was described as a smart girl, so maybe she pieced together those facts and came up with that extraordinary idea. After that incident she began to notice the “A” more often. While her mother and Chillingworth were talking, she goes down to the seashore and takes “some eel grass, and imitated, as best she could, on her own bosom, the decoration with which she was so familiar on her mother’s. A letter – the letter “A” – but freshly green, instead of scarlet” (174). Pearl still doesn’t know what the letter means and becomes more and more curious about it. Recently she had become fascinated by the letter, it somehow attracted her attention. In the previous quote Pearl was making an “A” to wear upon her bosom. She doesn t know what it stands for, so she probably assumes it is good. Pearl wants to know the meaning of the letter because it is so mysterious. Finally Pearl directly asks Hester, “What does the letter mean, Mother? – and why dost thou wear it? – and why does the minister keep his hand over his heart?” (177). Hester totally disregards the question and doesn t answer Pearl. She also notices that the minister always keeps his hand over his heart in the same place that Hester wears the letter “A.” As Pearl becomes older, she’s becoming much more observant and determined to figure out why her mother wears a scarlet letter, why the Reverend always hold his hand to his heart, and why she has no father. Finally before Dimmesdale dies, the mysteriousness of the “A” leaves and she realizes what the true meaning is.

The scarlet letter symbolized many different things that were all mainly fixed by the end of the book. Dimmesdale finally admitted he was Pearl’s father before he passed on, Pearl finally realized really what the letter meant, and Hester regained most of the respect she had lost. The thoughts in The Scarlet Letter are much different in modern days. The beliefs and morals have all basically changed. Committing adultery is not as big of a deal anymore, which is probably not for the better. The book just shows how times have changed and proves that nowadays (as well as back then) that some people just don’t have enough respect for others. Maybe by reading this book it could change someone’s mind on what is right and what is wrong. Everyone commits sins, no one is perfect; but hopefully by reading this book it will make people think twice about what they’re doing!