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

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Sin is the main theme in the Scarlet Letter. All of the characters in the book

were somehow affected by the main sin, which was adultery. The three main

characters were the most widely affected, and their whole lives were molded by the

way they dealt with the sin. The sin surrounds, encloses, and strangles them.

There was no escaping from its harsh consequences.

Hester Prynne’s sin was as an adulteress, and the result of this was that she

had to wear the scarlet letter “A.” She feels that her sin has taken away everything

she had, and given her one thing in return; her baby. Although she had dignity and

pride when she first stepped out of the prison and when she stood upon the scaffold

this “A” unfamilarized and seperated her from the community, and she stood alone

with her child as she does for the most part of her life following this event. From

then on, she was to live away from the community with her baby, Pearl, and was

shunned by everyone. The sin she has committed has made her think that death

would be an easy way out and that she deserves little, for she says, “I have thought

of death, have wished for it, would have even prayed for it, were it fit that such as I

should pray for anything.” Throughout the next years, the sin Hester committed

changes her personality and identity. Once a beautiful woman, Hester now looks

plain and drab. Once passionate, she is now somber and serious. She had

contained a precious quality of womanhood that has now faded away. Her plain

gray clothes symbolize her temperament and disposition. There are also good

effects that the sin has on her. She becomes more giving and caring, and is

endlessly helping the poor and sick and doing neighbors favors. Hester feels that

she owes it to the community, and is also forcing herself into a life of service to

others. The sin stays with her throughout her life, and even when she leaves her

town, she feels obligated to come back and fullfill her punishment. The sin made

her lifestyle worse, but it changed her character somewhat for the better.

Arthur Dimmesdale, a reverend in the Puritan Church, committed the sin of

adultery with Hester. The difference between their cases was that Dimmesdale did

not confess until seven years after the crime took place. Although he never

received a punishment from the government as Hester did, he punished himself

night and day. He was severely tortured with guilt in his heart, and carried out

prolonged vigils, fasts, and other physical damage to himself. As a result of not

confessing his sin, he despised himself above all other things. The fact that

his parishoners love him more than they had after he told a sermon about

hypocrites makes him loathe himself all the more. Over the seven years that

this story takes place in, Dimmesdale becomes very ill. He becomes pale,

nervous and sickly. After a while, it gets to the point where he uses a cane to

walk, and people are afraid for his life. The reason for his illness is not

disease, but the effect of sin and guilt on his heart. Finally, after putting

himself through a living hell for seven years, Dimmesdale’s dying words are

his confession.

Roger Chillingworth comes to Boston to seek out his wife, Hester

Prynne. When he arrives, she is standing upon a scaffold with a baby in her

arms. After finding out what was going on, the first thing he says is “It irks me,

nevertheless, that the partner of her inquity should not, at least, stand on the

scaffold by her side. But he will be known!- he will be known!- he will be known!”

This foreshadows the sin that he commits, which is greater than Hester and

Dimmesdales’. Chillingworth devotes his entire life to finding Hester’s partner in

crime and punishing him. He suspects Dimmesdale and so becomes his doctor and

moves in with him. Once he is certain of his culprit, he keeps him alive to live in

agony. The effect of his great sin on his own character is that of a complete

transformation to evil. His physical characteristics become twisted and corrupted,

as does his soul and life purpose. His one-track mind leads him to eventual self-

deterioration. He is the worst sinner in the book, and once his transformation was

complete, there was no turning back.

The way sin affects the lives of the characters in the book, and the way they

each deal with it is both enlightening and unsettling. In a way, one can see why the

characters acted they way they did, but it’s unsettling to see them end up the way

they did. If there is one thing to learn from The Scarlet Letter, it is not to give in to

sin, and if you already have, own up to it and learn from it.