The Scarlet Letter: The Symbol Of The Scarlet Letter Essay, Research Paper

The Scarlet Letter: The Symbol of the Scarlet Letter

In Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter, Hester Prynne’s scarlet

token liberates her more than it punishes her. First of all, Hester’s soul is

freed by her admission of her crime; by enduring her earthly punishment, Hester

is assured of a place in the heavens. Also, though her appearance is much

hampered by the scarlet letter, her mind is freed by it, that an intellectual

passion rises from her isolation and suffering. Finally, it defines her

identity, for the letter makes Hester the woman that she is; it gives her roots,

character, and a uniqueness to her being that sets her apart from the other

Puritans. The scarlet letter is indeed a blessing to Hester Prynne, more than

the curse she believes it to be.

The scarlet symbol of ignominy may have defiled Hester’s public image,

yet it has been a benefit rather than a bane to her soul, for by admitting her

crime to the crowd, her soul is freed from two hells: first, the fiery pit

where she would otherwise go after death, and second, the own personal hell

Hester will create for herself if she had chosen to hide her sin in her heart.

Though it was ordered for Hester to wear the letter, it was still her own choice

to make it in a vivid scarlet, “so fantastically embroidered and illuminated

upon her bosom.” Hester chose red as the color of her brand of shame, to

declare to the rest of the townspeople that she is prepared to acknowledge her

sin, instead of denying it; she could have chosen to wear her “A” in a plain and

nondistinct color, to escape the townspeople’s disdain. By displaying her guilt

however, she is granted the opportunity to face her punishment bravely, thus

through her public humiliation, she achieves freedom from the personal guilt of

not suffering enough for her crimes. Furthermore, “the scarlet letter,

forthwith seemed to scorch into Hester’s breast, as if it had been red-hot.”

The scarlet A’s glowing embers, scorching they may be, also serve to heal, for

the pain they inflict on Hester enables her to properly atone for her sin; by

devoting this lifetime to repentance and expiation, she would receive relief in

her next life. To the Puritans she is shamed, yet to the heavens she is honored

as a repentant sinner who has returned to the loving arms of her Creator.

Finally, Hester’s scarlet emblem is found on the outside, while the mark that

her lover Dimmesdale is found in “his inmost heart.” Though Hester and

Dimmesdale are both branded with the scarlet “A”, there is a world of difference

between their badges of shame, for Hester’s scarlet token is embroidered in

dazzling gold thread and is displayed for everyone to see, showing that she

hides nothing, while Dimmesdale’s letter is branded on his chest: hidden from

the public eye, yet with an effect that is more potent than that of the scarlet

token on Hester’s breast. Indeed, the heat of glowing metal inflicts a far

greater pain than that of needle and thread, the throb of fire against skin is

more potent than a pin on a piece of cloth; though Hester may have to endure the

taunts of the pitiless Puritans, at least, unlike Dimmesdale, she does not have

to endure those of her own creation. Therefore, it can be concluded that Hester

was better off wearing the letter, for by a enduring a lifetime of pain and

agony, she escapes an eternity of unbearable torment.

The scarlet letter restrains Hester’s passionate nature in her

appearance, transforming her into a colorless and faceless woman, yet her

passion finds another outlet in the deep recesses of her own mind; Hester is

liberated by the scarlet letter since she discovers an intellectual passion as a

release from a dull and monotonous existence. Hester’s physical appearance may

be one of “marble coldness”, yet buried underneath those marble slabs her “newly

emancipated” intellect burns with great fervor. The pure yet hard marble

represents the Hester seen by the people; Solid and dependable, possessing a

serene yet pallid beauty. The vibrance that once dominated her features now

dominates her thoughts, her warm passion this time finding release in the

richness of her brilliant mind. “Hester [imbibes] the spirit” of intellectual

emancipation. Her passion, which once flowed generously in her physical

appearance, is now geared towards the exploration of her mind’s inner depths. A

dazzling face is replaced by a dazzling mind, as Hester escapes her desolation

in toying with new and fascinating ideas. Driven by reason instead of emotion,

Hester “[casts] away the fragments of the broken chain,” challenging the archaic

doctrines of the Puritans. The author mocks the outmoded and outdated beliefs

of the Puritans by depicting them as these “fragments”; in casting away these

ancient beliefs, Hester is freed from their unfair restrictions, in spirit if

not in body. Instead of being destroyed by the scarlet letter, Hester gains the

courage to question the Puritan’s view of justice; in a sense, Hester is freed

from her punishment, since she casts doubt on the actual magnitude of her sin.

Thus, the strangling gold threads of the scarlet letter are unable to choke out

the last of Hester’s passion, in fact, their searing pain enables to rise

against the dreariness of Hester’s life a liberated mind, unrestrained by the

menacing shackles of Puritanism.

Finally, the scarlet letter liberates Hester Prynne because it makes her

unique, and gives Hester her identity. First of all, the letter is fashioned

“in scarlet, fantastically embroidered in gold thread.” The color of the letter

itself attracts attention, for its vivid hue sets it apart from the

monochromatic garb of the other Puritans. It eclipses everything else, so that

Hester is the central figure in the picture that Hawthorne paints in the readers

mind; the rest are merely part of the grim background, serving only to enhance

the exquisite beauty of Hawthorne’s female protagonist. Also, “[New England]

had been the scene of her guilt, and [it] should be the scene of her earthly

punishment.” Thus Hester finds her roots in New England; the scarlet emblem had

made Puritan Boston her home, and gave her a sense of belonging. Hester had

made herself in Boston, it is the only place where she had really lived, and the

only place where she should die. Most importantly, the scarlet letter “is too

deeply branded” upon Hester, it has become a permanent part of her, that one

cannot exist without the other. The letter was born upon Hester’s sin, lived in

Hester’s shame, and died in Hester’s death; it cannot be taken away from her no

matter how hard she tries. To take it away would be to deny Hester’s own

identity, because without her ever-present companion she is nothing but simple

Puritan Mistress Prynne, instead of Hester, the woman of the scarlet letter.

Though she may deem the letter a “misery”, it had made her the woman she is, and

she would not be herself without the scarlet symbol.

Indeed, though originally meant as her punishment, the scarlet letter

actually liberates Hester from her guilt, and from even greater punishment. The

scorn she feels towards it, and the lengths she goes through to rid herself of

it show that she does not realize the good that the letter has done her. It may

have punished her, it may have caused her pain, yet the good deep within the

letter is greater than the evil that surrounds it on the outside. The scarlet

letter can thus also be viewed as an instrument of God, rather than an

instrument of Satan; sent to teach a lesson, rather than to punish; a holy brand,

rather than a mark of shame and ignominy. It was given to Hester as a means of

atoning her sin and achieving salvation, and as the scarlet letter “A” rests on

her sin-stained heart, it mends instead of causing more damage. Its scarlet

fire thus exorcises Hester Prynne’s personal demons, so that in the Afterlife

she can finally attain her peace.