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Comp and Lit

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TSL Outline

Thesis: In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, the author develops of the scarlet letter as a symbol, which mirrors the transformation of the character Hester Prynne from a state of sin to a state of grace.

I Hester's early behavior shows her reluctance to accept her punishment.

A. Instead of creating a bland, monochromatic letter A that will help her blend in, Hester employs her exceptional needlework skills to fashion an intricate, brightly-colored symbol that others will immediately notice when they see her.

1. "On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter A" (45).
2. In a community described as humorless and grey, where sin-shaming occurs in a very public manner, Hester chooses to wear her punishment in the brightest and boldest way possible, indicating that she is not shamed but instead rather proud of her symbolic sin.
3. Not only does she wear her scarlet symbol with apparent pride, she holds in her arms a second symbol.

B. The baby Hester holds serves as additional evidence of her sin; impossible for her to hide.

1. ". . . it seemed to be her first impulse to clasp the infant closely to her bosom . . . that she might thereby conceal a certain token," yet she realized that "one token of her shame would but poorly serve to hide another . . ." (45).
2. Hester's baby is the very reason why she is alone in her punishment: her lover could hide his sin, she could not. In such a way, she realizes that covering the symbol of her sin that she wears with the symbol of the same that she holds would be futile, so she holds her head high and proceeds to her public shaming.
3. From her earliest introduction, Hawthorne presents Hester as not cowering in her shame, but strong and steadfast in her acceptance of the path before her.

II As Hester continues to wear the burden of her shame every day, she finds ways to serve others.

A. Hester uses her skill with the needle not only to provide for herself and her child, but in making simple garments for those without means to provide for themselves.

1. "Hester bestowed all her superfluous means in charity, on wretches less miserable than herself . . . she employed in making coarse garments for the poor" (69).
2. Even as she creates fancy needlework to sell, her strict upbringing sees such work, which brings her happiness, as a sin, so she must also use her skill in a sober way, making plain clothes for the poor, even when they continue to look down on her.
3. As she helps the poor with her skilled sewing, she grows in sympathy for her fellow sinners, known only to her newly sin-sensitive heart.

B. Moving about her community as a solitary and scored figure, Hester feels a new sense of sympathy for those with hidden sin.

1. "She shuddered to believe, yet could not help believing, that [the scarlet letter] gave her a sympathetic knowledge of hidden sin in other hearts. . . if truth were everywhere to be shown, a scarlet letter would blaze forth on many a bosom besides Hester Prynne's?" (71).
2. She has been alone, shunned by those around her, yet she is not blind. She sees the sidelong glances that others throw her way, the from supposedly pious church goer to the innocent maiden. She knows who she was before she sinned, and she knows how easy it was for her to fall to her current position. The letter seems to be a beacon, a symbol of sympathy to those also struggling with the temptation to sin. Hester knows this includes everyone, and she understands.
3. As Hester proves herself through her actions and thoughts, her status in the community begins to rise.

III After years of continuing to do what is right by quietly raising her daughter despite the separation and shame imposed on her by her community, the very people who have shunned her begin to see her in a new light.

- A. Since she never fought against her punishment but simply went forward with her duty, the town now thinks of her more positively.
1. "She never battled with the public but submitted uncomplainingly to its worst usage; she made no claim upon it, in requital for what she suffered . . . the blameless purity of her life . . . was reckoned largely in her favor" (126).
 2. Their regard for her grows because they see her as a fixture of the community. Though still marked with both the letter she wears and her illegitimate child, her behavior is not marked with revenge or rebellion.

3. Not only is she quietly living her life, she is also active in helping the community.

B. Hester provides for the poor with her sewing as well as helps others in need.

1. "None so ready as she to give of her little substance to every demand of poverty . . .

None so devoted as Hester, when pestilence stalked through the town . . . there glimmered the embroidered letter, with comfort in its unearthly ray" (126).

2. Wearing her letter and accompanied by Pearl, Hester is a fixture in the town, particularly when it comes to those in need. Wherever there are poor, or sick, or mournful people, Hester is there to provide comfort, with her every-present letter providing comfort.

3. So strong is the community's view of Hester, they even begin to see the letter itself as representing something new.

C. Though the scarlet A was to initially stand for Adulteress, Hester's selfless actions cause it to represent something else instead—Able.

1. "Such helpfulness was found in her, -- so much power to do, and power to sympathise, that many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said that it meant able . . ." (127).

2. Hester's actions have belied the community's view of her as a scorned sinner. She has followed the Scriptural directive concerning love, that "greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (NIV, John 15:13).

3. Even as she acts graciously toward those who have treated her unfairly, Hester moves to help her fellow sinner, now nearly killed by his hidden guilt.

IV As she seeks to help her former lover absolve his own guilt and is in the process herself absolved, Hester still returns to the community after an absence, ending where she began.

- A. Hester has a plan to help Arthur Dimmesdale, who has been unable to experience the penitence available to Hester.
1. "Leave this wreck and ruin here where it hath happened! . . . Begin all anew! . . . There is happiness to be enjoyed! There is good to be done! Exchange this false life of thine for a true one" (155).
 2. Hester recognizes that, while her journey of isolation and ignominy has been difficult, it is nothing compared to Dimmesdale's hidden sin and overwhelming hypocrisy. She seeks to release him from his guilt even as she has been.
 3. Though the plan is sound, it is not to be, and Dimmesdale's long-overdue confession releases Hester at last.
- B. Dimmesdale's guilt, hidden up to this time, is finally exposed for what it is, and Hester is, in a sense, redeemed.
1. "He bids you look again at Hester's scarlet letter! He tells you, that, with all its mysterious horror, it is but the shadow of what he bears on his own breast, and that even this, his own red stigma, is not more than the type of what has seared his inmost heart!" (198)
 2. Unable to escape with Hester, Dimmesdale confesses that he was her partner in crime all along. This releases her from the guilt that she has carried for both of them.
 3. After this, Hester leaves the community to raise Pearl abroad. But her work is not yet done in the community that has made her their scarlet letter.
- C. Despite the freedom to leave and never come back, Hester returns after Pearl is grown.
1. "She had returned, therefore, and resumed . . . the symbol . . . [which] ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world's scorn and bitterness, and became a type of

something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence, too" (204).

2. Hester came back when she was not required to and continued to wear the scarlet letter until she died.
3. "Here had been her sin; here, her sorrow; and here was yet to be her penitence" (204).