



Hester's A: The Red Badge of Wisdom

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Framing Question

What does the scarlet A do for Hester Prynne?

Understanding

By deepening her emotional sympathy and by allowing her to liberate her thinking from Puritan orthodoxy, Hester Prynne's scarlet letter, meant to exclude her from the community, functions ironically as the agent of her inclusion.

Text

[*The Scarlet Letter*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1850](#)

Background

For symbol hunters, reading Nathaniel Hawthorne's novels and short stories is like going on a grand safari. On almost every page a big, inviting target lumbers into view. What does the pink ribbon mean in "Young Goodman Brown," or the plant and the fountain in "Rappaccini's Daughter," or Georgiana's blemish in "The Birthmark"? The biggest Hawthorne trophy is that splendid red A Hester Prynne wears on her dress in *The Scarlet Letter*. Critics have devoted a lot of time and ink to ferreting out all the meanings of that complex and contradictory symbol. Perhaps your teacher has asked you to join that hunt. Here's a hint: Hawthorne suggests virtually all of the A's meanings early in the novel when he introduces Hester as she emerges from jail.

In this lesson we are not going to concentrate on what the A means. Rather, we are going to consider what it does. Clearly, it does a lot to Hester. It exiles her and Pearl to a lonely existence in a remote cottage. It subjects her to malice, scorn, and insult. In a thousand ways, the narrator tells us, "did she feel the innumerable throbs of anguish that had been so cunningly contrived for her by the undying, ever-active sentence of the Puritan tribunal." The "red-hot brand" consumes the joy and grace of her personality and even works a "sad transformation" on her beauty.

But does the A doing anything for Hester?



"The Scarlet Letter," by Hugues Merle, 1861

Actually, it does. Hester could relieve some of the suffering inflicted by the wearing of the A simply by leaving Boston. No one is forcing her to stay. Yet she remains, even though she knows that she will be the go-to example every time the topics of shame, guilt, and sin come up, as they often did in Puritan Boston. She stays, the narrator says, because an “irresistible” feeling binds her to the “spot where... [a] great... event has given the color to” her life. Moreover, “there dwelt” in Boston “one with whom she deemed herself connected in a union.” While these may have been her real reasons for remaining, she, according to the narrator, half deludes herself into thinking that by enduring “the torture of her daily shame,” she will “at length purge her soul.” For whatever reasons, Hester feels bound to the scene of her sin. After Dimmesdale and Chillingworth die, she does leave, only to return years later to take up again “her long-forsaken shame.” She moves back into her cottage, but now, instead of being isolated there, she is embraced by the community as a counsellor and comforter to the sorrowful and perplexed. Ironically, it is the scarlet A, the symbol of her exclusion, that enables her to fill that role. Just how it does that is the subject of this lesson.

Contextualizing Questions

1. What kind of text are we dealing with?
2. When was it written?
3. Who wrote it?
4. For what audience was it intended?
5. For what purpose was it written?

Text Analysis

Excerpt 1, from Chapter V: Hester at her Needle

...

Walking to and fro, with those lonely footsteps, in the little world with which she was outwardly connected, it now and then appeared to Hester, — if altogether fancy, it was nevertheless too potent to be resisted, — she felt or fancied, then, that the scarlet letter had endowed her with a new sense. She shuddered to believe, yet could not help believing, that it gave her a sympathetic knowledge of the hidden sin in other hearts. She was terror-stricken by the revelations that were thus made. What were they? Could they be other than the insidious whispers of the bad angel [Satan], who would fain have persuaded the struggling woman, as yet only half his victim, that the outward guise of purity was but a lie, and that, if truth were everywhere to be shown, a scarlet letter would blaze forth on many a bosom besides Hester Prynne’s? Or, must she receive those intimations — so obscure, yet so distinct — as truth? In all her miserable experience, there was nothing else so awful and so loathsome as this sense. It perplexed, as well as shocked her, by the irreverent inopportuneness of the occasions that brought it into vivid action. Sometimes, the red infamy upon her breast would give a sympathetic throb, as she passed near a venerable minister or magistrate, the model of piety and justice, to whom that age of antique reverence looked up, as to a mortal man in fellowship with angels. “What evil thing is at hand?” would Hester say to herself. Lifting her reluctant eyes, there would be nothing human within the scope of view, save the form of this earthly saint! Again, a mystic sisterhood would contumaciously assert itself, as she met the sanctified frown of some matron, who, according to the rumor of all tongues, had kept cold snow within her bosom throughout life. That unsunned snow in the matron’s bosom, and the burning shame on Hester Prynne’s, — what had the two in common? Or, once more, the electric thrill would give her warning, — “Behold, Hester, here is a companion!” — and, looking up, she would detect the eyes of a young maiden glancing at the scarlet letter, shyly and aside, and quickly averted, with a faint, chill crimson in her cheeks; as if her purity were somewhat sullied by that momentary glance. O Fiend, whose talisman was that fatal symbol, wouldst thou leave nothing, whether in youth or age, for this poor sinner to revere? — Such loss of faith is ever one of the saddest results of sin. Be it accepted as a proof that all was not corrupt in this poor victim of her own frailty, and man’s hard law, that Hester Prynne yet struggled to believe that no fellow-mortal was guilty like herself.

Activity: Vocabulary

Learn definitions by exploring how words are used in context.



1. To what is the narrator referring when he mentions “the little world” with which Hester is “outwardly connected”?

2. “Walking to and fro, with those lonely footsteps, in the little world with which she was outwardly connected” — what do those lines suggest about Hester and about her relationship to the Puritan community?

3. With what “new sense” does the scarlet letter endow Hester?

4. How does the narrator use the word “sympathetic”?

5. What alternate explanations does the narrator offer to account for Hester’s new awareness of the sins of others?

6. We can restate the explanations the narrator poses as a question: Is Hester’s sense that other people are sinners like herself a false perception planted in her mind by Satan, or is it true?

7. Neither Hester nor the narrator understands her new perceptions. Ironically, as readers, we do: they are real and true. We share the implied viewpoint of the author. Based on our viewpoint, what can we say the scarlet letter has done for Hester?

Excerpt 2, from Chapter XIII: Another View of Hester

...

The effect of the symbol — or rather, of the position in respect to society that was indicated by it — on the mind of Hester Prynne herself, was powerful and peculiar.

...

Much of the marble coldness of Hester’s impression [the way she appeared to others] was to be attributed to the circumstance that her life had turned, in a great measure, from passion and feeling, to thought. Standing alone in the world, — alone, as to any dependence on society, and with little Pearl to be guided and protected, — alone, and hopeless of retrieving her position, even had she not scorned to consider it desirable, — she cast away the fragment of a broken chain. The world’s law was no law for her mind. It was an age in which the human intellect, newly emancipated, had taken a more active and a wider range than for many centuries before. Men of the sword had overthrown nobles and kings. Men bolder than these had overthrown and rearranged — not actually, but within the sphere of theory, which was their most real abode — the whole system of ancient prejudice, wherewith was linked much of ancient principle. Hester Prynne imbibed this spirit. She assumed a freedom of speculation, then common enough on the other side of the Atlantic, but which our forefathers, had they known of it, would have held to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatized by the scarlet letter. In her lonesome cottage, by the sea-shore, thoughts visited her, such as dared to enter no other dwelling in New England; shadowy guests, that would have been as perilous as demons to their entertainer, could they have been seen so much as knocking at her door.

8. In the first sentence the narrator explains that Hester's position in society rather than the actual letter itself had a "powerful and peculiar" effect on her mind. How would you characterize her position in the society of Boston?

9. What does the narrator mean when he says Hester "cast away the fragment of a broken chain"?

10. How has Hester's position in society affected her?

11. How would you characterize Hester's new intellectual life?

12. The story is set in the 1640s. Thus when the narrator refers to the bold, speculative, revolutionary age whose spirit comes to Hester from "the other side of the Atlantic," he is referring to such developments as the works of French philosopher Rene Descartes, published in the 1630s and 40s, that shook the foundations of Western thought, and the advancement of the scientific revolution begun in the early decades of the 1600s that challenged God-centered explanations of natural phenomena. Why would the Puritan forefathers have considered speculating on the ideas of such an age "a deadlier crime" than adultery?

13. The narrator does not judge Hester's intellectual rebellion. He simply tells us that it would place her in danger if it were known to her neighbors. How are we as readers to understand Hester's new way of thinking? Is it sinful?

14. On the basis of this passage, what has the scarlet A done for Hester?

Excerpt 3, from Chapter XXIV: Conclusion

But there was a more real life for Hester Prynne, here, in New England.... Here had been her sin; here, her sorrow; and here was yet to be her penitence. She had returned, therefore, and resumed, — of her own free will, for not the sternest magistrate of that iron period would have imposed it, — resumed the symbol of which we have related so dark a tale. Never afterwards did it quit her bosom. But, in the lapse of the toilsome, thoughtful, and self-devoted years that made up Hester's life, the scarlet letter 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. And, as Hester Prynne had no selfish ends, nor lived in any measure for her own profit and enjoyment, people brought all their sorrows and perplexities, and besought her counsel, as one who had herself gone through a mighty trouble. Women, more especially, — in the continually recurring trials of wounded, wasted, wronged, misplaced, or erring and sinful passion, — or with the dreary burden of a heart unyielded, because unvalued and unsought, — came to Hester's cottage, demanding why they were so wretched, and what the remedy! Hester comforted and counselled them, as best she might. She assured them, too, of her firm belief, that, at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness. Earlier in life, Hester had vainly imagined that she herself might be the destined prophetess, but had long since recognized the impossibility that any mission of divine and mysterious truth should be confided to a woman stained with sin, bowed down with shame, or even burdened with a life-long sorrow. The angel and apostle of the coming revelation must be a woman, indeed, but lofty, pure, and beautiful; and wise; moreover, not through dusky grief, but the ethereal medium of joy; and showing how sacred love should make us happy, by the truest test of a life successful to such an end!

15. How does the meaning of the scarlet A change?

16. Why does the meaning of the letter change?

17. Why do her neighbors seek her comfort and counsel when afflicted with "sorrows and perplexities"?

18. Why would women be especially inclined to confide in her?

19. The sympathy and understanding her neighbors find in her bring them to her door and make her part of the community once again. In what way is this reintegration attributable to the scarlet A?

20. In addition to emotional comfort, Hester offers the women who come to her a vision of a new social order that will rearrange relationships between men and women to the benefit of both. In what way is this new vision attributable to the scarlet A?

21. How has the scarlet A functioned as the agent of Hester's inclusion into Puritan Boston, and why is that function ironic?

Glossary

potent: strong

endowed: given

insidious: subtly harmful

fain: gladly

guise: appearance

intimations: hints

obscure: faint

loathsome: disgusting

perplexed: confused

inopportuneness: inappropriateness

vivid: lively

infamy: evil thing

venerable: respected

reluctant: unwilling

mystic: spiritual

contumaciously: rebelliously

sanctified: blessed

talisman: sign

frailty: weakness

scorned: rejected

abode: dwelling place

imbibed: drank in

stigmatized: made shameful

penitence: regret for misdeeds

quit: leave

lapse: passage of time

toilsome: wearying

stigma: sign of shame

scorn: disrespect

type: symbol

awe: fear

perplexities: confused thoughts

besought: asked for

recurring: repeating

vainly: with excess pride

ethereal: spiritual

medium: means