

The marvelous meaning of the scarlet letter

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



Life today has changed remarkably from life in the 1800s. During the colonial period, less than 11.1% of births occurred within the first nine months of marriage. A reported 95% of Americans today have had premarital sex. In today's society, premarital sex is not considered a sin to most people. In the 1800s, it was a different story. In the novel *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Hester Prynne was found guilty of adultery, branded with a scarlet A, and shunned by the town--an extreme punishment by modern standards.

This A that Hester was forced to embroider onto all of her clothing symbolized not only her sin, but the A also held meaning for other characters. It represented the guilt of the man with whom Hester committed adultery: Reverend Dimmesdale. Hester never revealed his identity to the town, and Dimmesdale felt as if he could not confess his sin. Dimmesdale was consumed with penitence, marking himself with an A of his own. Pearl, Hester's daughter, was another character who found meaning in the scarlet letter, however hers was much different from either Hester's or Dimmesdale's.

Pearl was the product of her parents' sin. She was the scarlet letter. For Pearl, the scarlet letter symbolizes life, and she did not understand why it caused her mother so much shame. Essentially, the symbolism of the scarlet letter changed over the course of the novel from something negative, epitomizing shame and sin, to something positive, representing absolution and vitality. The scarlet letter most obviously symbolizes Hester's sin: adultery. She was forced to wear it as punishment, a cruel reminder of her immorality.

Hester had to make the letter herself, so instead of letting it define her, she made it beautiful: “ 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. It was so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel which she wore... but greatly beyond what was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony” (37). The fact that she embroidered the letter so delicately and so beautifully completely destroyed the purpose for wearing it.

In this way, the scarlet letter represents Hester’s independence and free will. Despite the fact that Hester was able to defy the town in that small way, the townspeople saw a different meaning of the scarlet letter. Instead of simply symbolizing the sin of adultery, the town allowed the letter to symbolize Hester herself. When they looked at her, they saw not a human being, not Hester Prynne, but they saw “ a living sermon against sin, until the ignominious letter be engraved upon her tombstone” (44). The town used Hester and the scarlet A to strike fear into their children, to warn them against the sin of adultery.

The letter cloaked Hester Prynne. However, the town’s view of Hester changed, thus altering the symbolic meaning of the scarlet letter. Hester never offered “ irritation or irksomeness. She never battled with the public, but submitted uncomplainingly to its worst usage” (110). She helped those in need and was always there to offer a helping hand. Most people in the town had no choice but to “ refuse to interpret the scarlet A by its original

signification. " The A no longer exemplified adultery, but rather it represented " able.

" The town acknowledged Hester's strength, which was what managed to change the symbolism of the A. While Hester Prynne was embracing the A, Reverend Dimmesdale was struggling to escape his own scarlet letter. Dimmesdale was respected and admired by the town, which caused him extreme guilt. He watched as Hester was publicly humiliated, yet he felt as if he could not confess because of his occupation. He was afraid of the " light his vague confession would be viewed" (99) by the town. He would be refused as a minister, and seen as the " remorseful hypocrite that he was" (99).

Dimmesdale became so consumed with his guilt and shame, that he became physically ill. The A represented his self-punishment, which was worse than if he had confessed publicly. In fact, Dimmesdale envied the ease with which Hester dealt with her scarlet letter so much that he confessed to her how much his secret burned within him: " Happy you, Hester, that wear the scarlet letter openly upon your bosom! Mine burns in secret! Thou little knowest what a relief it is, after the torment of a seven years' cheat, to look into an eye that recognizes me for what I am" (131).

Dimmesdale was forced to live with the guilt of his misdeed, whereas Hester did not have to hide what she had done. The scarlet letter represented his sin as much as it represented hers, only he could not confess his. When he was with Hester, he felt relief because Hester knew the truth about what he had done. It is when Dimmesdale finally confessed to his sin and claimed Pearl as his daughter that he was able to let go of his guilt, changing what

the scarlet letter meant to him. He revealed his involvement with Hester by telling the town to “ 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 no more than the type of what has seared his inmost heart” (174). Dimmesdale removed his shirt to reveal an A, marked onto his own chest, whether by Dimmesdale’s own hand, or by the hand of God. For him, the confession freed him of his guilt and shame, allowing him to forgive himself. The scarlet letter that once symbolized his sin, represented his courage to confess and his ability to finally forgive himself.

Dimmesdale died after that, because the release of his grip on the scarlet letter that tortured him, allowed him to release his grip on a life that which was haunted by his sin. A character with a unique perspective in the novel, as well as an interesting perception of scarlet letter was the product of the sin--Pearl. The scarlet letter ultimately symbolized the life and love of Pearl. She was pure and had the ability to see the true selves of others, which she understood when she said “ Come away, mother! Come away, or yonder Black Man will catch you! He hath got hold of the minister already.

Come away, mother, or he will catch you! But he cannot catch little Pearl” (92). She knew that Dimmesdale had sinned, although she did not know what the sin was, and she knew that she was innocent and pure, and could not be touched by sin. Although the meaning of the scarlet letter did not change much for Pearl, exactly what it meant to her shone brightly through the words on the pages. Pearl knew that “ the great letter A” (122) had given life to her. Hester thought that Pearl did not know what the letter meant,

because of the fact that Pearl constantly asked her mother for the meaning of the A.

Perhaps Pearl's innocence kept her from seeing the sin that both her mother and Dimmesdale had committed, but it is clear when Hester asked Pearl if she knew what the letter meant, that Pearl indeed understood it represented sin: " It is for the same reason that the minister keeps his hand over his heart" (122). Since Pearl was able to sense the wrongdoing of others, she knew that Hester's physical scarlet letter embroidered on her bosom and Dimmesdale's internal scarlet letter seared into his chest were both results of sin.

She could not grasp that her mother's letter meant anything atrocious because it was so familiar to her; she had lived her entire life seeing the letter upon her mother's chest. To Pearl, the A represented her mother and their life together. In the end of the novel, the scarlet letter appeared to represent perhaps the most important element of *The Scarlet Letter*: Family. Hester and Dimmesdale struggled throughout the book to forgive each other and forgive themselves. They were not able to join together as one unit, protecting and loving their daughter, Pearl.

Both characters sought to find meaning from the scarlet letter, aside from the negative one bound to it by the town. However, as Dimmesdale built the courage to confess his sin of adultery, he was able to let go of his guilt and accept Pearl. The A indeed might have represented an A for " able. " For, even though the town had " doomed Mistress Prynne...for the remainder of her natural life, to wear a mark of shame upon her bosom" (43), and Dimmesdale suffered from the weight of shame, they were able to overcome

the stigma of the scarlet letter and bring life to the marvelous meaning of the scarlet letter: Love.