

The scarlet letter: themes alive today

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Mike Esposito Mrs. Forstrom American Literature – 17 November 2012 The Themes Are Still Alive Today AhThe Scarlet Letter, whether we like it or not, it is now a book we have all read and have most likely come to hate.

Whether it be because of the old setting in the Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony in Boston that we cannot relate to or the old English language in which it is written, Nathaniel Hawthorne just failed to create a novel that most teenagers of the early twenty-first century can enjoy and appreciate.

It must be pointed out that first, it's doubtful he cares, and more importantly that this just simply should not be the case. We juniors should pay more attention to the novel, especially with the thought that the messages Hawthorne tries to convey are still relevant today. Think about it. With all of the experiences of Hester Prynne and other characters in the novel, we interpret concepts that are still correlated with those of today.

In Hawthorne's the Scarlet Letter, two crucial themes of sin and what it can do to people and the different degrees of evil directly relate to today's society and modern ideas. As it is known, Hester committed a sin in the novel with Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale that the Puritans in her society thought to be one of the worst that could ever be committed: adultery. They conceived a child together, their daughter Pearl, which is a sin that takes a toll on both characters in many different ways.

Beginning with Hester, the protagonist, the sin is something that identifies her, and she becomes one with it. At the beginning of the novel, you should recall that she has to take her first punishment of being humiliated on the scaffold and ridiculed by many people of the community while wearing the

letter “ A” on her chest to indicate that she committed adultery. But she does not just stick any regular printed letter on her.

She goes beyond, as Hawthorne describes, “ But the point which drew all eyes and, as it were, transfigured the wearer—so that both men and women, who had been familiarly acquainted with Hester Prynne, were now impressed as if they beheld her for the first time—was that Scarlet Letter, so fantastically embroidered and illuminated upon her bosom. It had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity and enclosing her in a sphere by herself” (51-52). Hester makes the Scarlet Letter so beautiful because it is a part of who she is and it determines her identity.

Also, throughout the book, Hester shows she accepts her sin, especially through the fact that she wants to stay in Boston instead of leave to go elsewhere. She does this because she does not want to pretend that the situation never happened and deny a part of who she is. This tremendously demonstrates the message that sin can give someone fortitude. In addition, forgiveness is something that can also result of sin. This is demonstrated very creatively through the changing of the letter A on Hester’s shirt.

It first symbolized the sin she committed, but later in the novel, changes to mean other positive things, such as “ able” and “ awe”. The change of what the letter means shows that her sin was made up for and that she is forgiven. However, in complete contrast to Hester is Dimmesdale, the father, who shows what can also result from sin. No one ever finds out that until late that he was on the other end of the affair with Hester, which was not a good thing for Dimmesdale. Throughout the novel, his psychological turmoil

worsens as he unintentionally inflicts his own punishment of self hatred and guilt.

He gets vitally ill and sicker as time progresses, which is reinforced with him always having his hand over his heart. One night his agony and remorse sleepwalks him to the scaffold that Hester was embarrassed on years earlier, as Hawthorne words it, " he had been driven hither by the impulse of that Remorse which dogged him everywhere" (144). This clearly portrays the message of hiding a sin can be too much to handle and can destroy a person. Now that the theme of the different things sin can lead to is discussed in The Scarlet Letter, let's relate it to our life.

As the Christian religion will preach, everyone in the entire world sins all the time. Whether the sins are small or really serious, they are a part of our life all the time, and mostly those that are seriously poor decisions can have a great affect on us. As is illustrated with Hester in the novel, those poor choices can be made up for and can give us strength in our later life. For example, steroid use in baseball is a very popular issue. Ryan Braun, outfielder in the MLB, was suspected to have used performance enhancing drugs after a failed urine test.

Clearly, taking steroids was a bad choice for him to make, and although it is not commonly thought of as one, it is a sin. However, Braun came back the next season after the scandal and had a careeryear. He recognized his mistake and came back stronger than ever, which is quite relatable to Hester and how her sin made her bold. Also, on the other side, sins can lead people today into having too much guilt to be able to handle, no matter how venial

or mortal the sin may be. You may lie to your parents and just not be able to hold back a confession because you feel bad.

Or, it may be as serious as a murderer who could not live with himself anymore and turned himself in. Whatever the case may be, what Hawthorne wrote about sin in the 1800's in *The Scarlet Letter* still relates to aspects of life today. Roger Chillingworth, that doctor that we know and love, presents another major theme in the novel: there are many levels of evil. As we know, Chillingworth was the husband of Hester before she had the affair with Dimmesdale, which obviously is an evil to the Puritans of the colony.

One of the details that you may have missed is that the marriage between Chillingworth and Hester was arranged, and that she had no say in it. On a side note, Chillingworth was about double Hester's age, which makes the marriage worse, and kind of gross. But this plays a role in that Hester more likely committed the sin because she wasn't really in love with Chillingworth, and was with Dimmesdale. This is the justification of her doing what she did. And in addition to the evils that Hester and Dimmesdale carried out, Chillingworth also does.

You should remember that as Dimmesdale was sick, Chillingworth, the "brilliant acquisition", was chosen to be his doctor and he had to try to save the colony's well loved minister. As he did this, he suspected something interesting going on with Dimmesdale, and he figured out that he was involved with Hester and realizes his suspicions are correct. So instead of curing him, he begins to torture the minister. This act of malice is definitely more widely considered evil than the acts of Hester and Dimmesdale to us, which is exactly what Hawthorne wants us to think.

He demonstrates the theme bluntly in Dimmesdale's speech to Hester when he talks about Chillingworth's evil, " There is one worse than even that polluted priest! That old man's revenge has been blacker than my sin. He has violated, in cold blood, the sanctity of a human heart. Thou and I, Hester, never did so! " (191). Hawthorne clearly wants you to realize that the evil found in Hester and Dimmesdale's lovemaking is not nearly as bad as evil in its most poisonous form of the cruel revenge taken by Chillingworth.

Evidently, the theme of different levels of evil is clearly presented in the novel, but it also occurs in real life. It is a very upsetting fact, but it is true: evil has not gone away. It existed in the eighteenth century, the time period where *The Scarlet Letter* takes place, the nineteenth century, when the novel was written, and right now, where it is still around today. We know that evil can be something that is somber, such as a serial killer that just doesn't have a conscience and will never grasp the concept that death is something so mind bogglingly terrible and should never be done to a person.

That is one extreme. Evil can also be used to describe your teacher, even if the only reason why is because you didn't like that she gave you a pop quiz that you failed. This may seem barely related to evil talked about in *The Scarlet Letter*, but it is not, however. This is because as the Puritans call the acts of love of Hester and Dimmesdale " evil", we still don't really think that they were necessarily evil for doing so, just like the hypothetical teacher probably does not have much of an evil soul.

So, there are many different degrees of evil, and they exist in modern context as well as in the wonderful novel. As you now well educated pupils should realize, the novel written hundreds of years ago, *The Scarlet Letter*,
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about a world that we can't seem to be able to relate to, is still very useful in today's modern society because of the relation between the novel's major themes and their relation to today's modern society.

Sin and what it can do to people is a large concept that is a lot to grasp, and it is discussed thoroughly in the book and is clearly alive today. Additionally, the different degrees of evil in the world is definitely a focus of both the novel and our current lives. So no more calling the book bad and difficult and boring. Respect its greatness. Works Cited Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 1988. Print.