

Three meanings for "a" in the scarlet letter



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Change is an inevitable part of life; basically everything on Earth periodically develops into something new. Though not every change is drastic, it can still be noticed over time. Sometimes change is progressive, but other times it can be regressive. In *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, the translation of the "A" develops from "adulterer," to "able," and finally to "amends." When we first meet Hester, her "A" means adulterer.

The townspeople are very horrified with her actions and desire a harsher punishment bestowed upon her. One even goes as far as to insist, "This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die" (49). The townspeople are not content with the punishment she has received and believe that the magistrates should impose a harsher sentence. However, the "A" that is sewn on her bosom becomes a visible representation of her act of adultery and she is thereby reduced to the symbol of sin itself.

Hawthorne declares, "Thus the young and pure would be taught to look at her, with the scarlet letter flaming on her breast - at her, the child of honorable parents, at her, the mother of a babe, that would hereafter be a woman, at her who had once been innocent - as a figure, the body, the reality of sin" (76). This description indicates that she has become the embodiment of evil for the good to consider when they are tempted to commit evil.

They should look at the woman who used to be pure—who has a child that will be a great woman one day, who has good parents—and realize that she has become a bad person because of her sin. Hester is placed under a magnifying glass for the entire town to judge her when she stands on the

scaffold. They scrutinize her choices in life and look down upon her because of her illegitimate child. She is burned by their treatment and by the "A" that she cannot shed. Hawthorne describes her dilemma when he writes: Accordingly, the crowd was somber and grave.

The unhappy culprit sustained herself as best a woman might, under the heavy weight of a thousand unrelenting eyes, all fastened upon her and centred at her bosom. It was almost intolerable to be borne. Of an impulsive and passionate nature, she had fortified herself to encounter the stings and venomous stable of public contumely, wreaking itself in every variety of insult; but there was a quality so much more terrible in the solemn mood of the popular mind, that she longed rather to behold all those rigid countenances contorted with scornful merriment and herself the object. 55) At this point, Hester is being judged by all the townspeople and is simply trying to hold onto her sanity, attempting to look brave and not be completely destroyed by their contemptuous glares. With the passage of time, the meaning of Hester's "A" is softened and takes on the meaning of the word "able." She becomes so familiar to the townspeople that the "A" ceases to irritate them. She gives them no further reason to despise her by staying out of their way, by not causing anymore scandals, and by limiting her interactions with them.

Thus they become accustomed to her and to the "A". They begin to realize that she is a good and humble person who helps others. Their change of attitude is illustrated by: "The letter was the symbol of her calling. Such helpfulness was found in her - so much power to do and power to sympathize - that many people refused to interpret the scarlet "A" by its

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original signification. They said it meant 'Able'; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength" (158). Their view of her as a burden has been replaced by the sense that she is helpful, sympathetic, kind, and powerful.

They see her strength and power through the "A" and what she has somewhat overcome. The "A" not only shows mental strength, but also a physical strength that keeps her safe. "Had she fallen among thieves, [the letter] would have kept her safe. It was reported, and believed by many, that an Indian had drawn his arrow against the badge, and that the missile struck it, but it fell harmless to the ground" (159). The story means that the "A" has become impenetrable and will protect Hester, whether it be from physical danger or the danger of sin.

The "A" morphs from a symbol of disgrace for the town to a symbol of pride. They no longer see her "A" as a symbol of her punishment, but instead they say it is a badge, like a cross on a nun. These changes are described by Hawthorne: Individuals in private life, meanwhile, had quite forgiven Hester Prynne for her frailty; nay, more, they had begun to look upon the scarlet letter as the token, not of that one sin, for which she had borne so long and dreary a penance, but for her many good deeds since. "Do you see that woman with the embroidered badge? they would say to strangers. "It is our Hester - the town's own Hester - who is kind to the poor, so helpful to the sick, so comforting to the afflicted" . . . the scarlet letter has the effect of the cross on a nun's bosom. (159) From the time of her punishment the "A" has become a representation of all the good she has done. The people no longer think that it shows the sin she committed, but that it is a token of what has

developed as a result of the sin. The townspeople now tell people all about Hester's goodness, praising her to others.

Finally, the "A" represents "amends." The "A" has helped Hester atone for her sin and improve her being. By the end of the book her "A" is no longer negative; it is actually a symbol that astonishes people. Hawthorne writes: "[T]he 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" (257). The "A" has become a good example for others and indicates that Hester can stop feeling guilty for her actions.

Hester is able to accept her "A." After she leaves the town she realizes that the "A" has become a part of her and returns to wear it again. The "A" will always be who Hester is. She feels she must adorn the "A" to atone her sins. "Here had been her sin; here, her sorrow; and here has 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"(257).

Hester regards the "A" as a lifelong adornment for her, and so she continues on her journey of penance when she puts it back on. Initially, the "A" that Hester is forced to wear means "adulterer." As the book progresses and people change how they view her, the meaning becomes "able." Finally, with Hester realizing that the "A" is no longer shameful, it represents the "amends" she has made since her sin was committed. So, throughout the

novel, the scarlet " A" that is sewn on Hester's bosom takes on multiple meanings: adulterer, able, and amends.