

Stereotypes in the scarlet letter essay

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Nathaniel Hawthorne communicates through his novel *The Scarlet Letter* that some dogmatic attempts by society to label a person by his or her actions in the past will fail. Subjectivity across the community and throughout time changes the meaning of a symbol society implements to control an idea. The scarlet letter “A” Hester Prynne wears exemplifies this.

The town wants the object to arouse feelings of ignominy towards Hester; however, not everyone who meets Hester interprets it the same way. The town originally regards the letters as a signification of ignominy, but this interpretation soon switches to ability, and, finally, to honor as Hester’s action prevail in the subjectivity across time. Subjectivity also leads the scarlet letter to hold different meanings for Chillingworth, Dimmesdale, and even for the governor’s butler. The beginning of the novel seems to imply that there is no subjectivity concerning the letter. The town initially views the scarlet letter as a designation of wrongdoing.

The letter the town forces Hester Prynne to wear turns her into “a living sermon against sin, until the ignominious letter be engraved upon her tombstone” (Hawthorne 59). Nearly all the townspeople view her this way and young children run away from her in fear and disgust when they see her. The town magistrates are proud that the scarlet letter is appearing to achieve its objective. The town is learning to hate her, “thus the young and pure would be taught to look at her, with the scarlet letter flaming on her breast...as the figure, the body, the reality of sin” (73). This implies that the letter was successful in its purpose. This is not the case; subjectivity does prevail. Hester’s actions generate changes in the scarlet letter’s meaning through time’s inherently subjective nature.

She originally sews the scarlet letter A in such an elaborate and decorative manner “ that it [has] all the effect of a last and fitting decoration...but greatly beyond what [is] allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony” (50). By adorning the letter instead of sewing it plainly, she removes part of its Puritan influence. This act spurs a series of actions that alter the meaning the scarlet letter holds for the common people. Hester performs many charitable acts of penance for her sin. This causes the town to shift focus from her grievous sin to her new munificent deeds despite the magistrate’s malevolent intent for the letter to spurn contempt.

The scarlet letter A no longer stands for ignominy or adulterer; instead, the townspeople “[say] that it [means] Able, so strong [is] Hester Prynne, with a woman’s strength” (146). This positive force augments as Hester and Pearl age. Once the ordeal with Dimmesdale and Chillingworth ends, “ the scarlet letter [ceases] to be a stigma which attracted the world’s scorn and bitterness, and [becomes] a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too” (234).

Hester’s letter reminds the people of her hardships and the great personal strength she maintains to overcome them. This lack of immorality changes the public’s perceptions of Hester because people are not capable of dogmatic hatred or scorn once the object of the hatred no longer commits despicable actions. Therefore, when Hester no longer displays moral failing, the scarlet letter no longer symbolizes it. Many subsequent good deeds have the capacity to overpower one bad deed committed in the past. This is because subjectivity pervades time. Time can judge people only in the frame of the present because the value of most actions tends to diminish in the

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presence of other actions. A person cannot justifiably consider another person “ bad” if his or her actions are overwhelmingly good despite any shortcomings. The town’s objective to use the scarlet letter to condemn Hester everlastingly fails because of good deeds’ power to overcome the diminished magnitude of bad deeds.

As long as such a multitude of good deeds exists, the subjective value of goodness will outweigh that of evil. This occurs in *The Scarlet Letter* as Hester continues to perform penance for her singular sin, thus preventing society from preserving its hatred for her. Nevertheless, even when noted in the isolation of one period, the scarlet letter fails to set the moral standards for the community because of the prevalence of subjectivity among people. Different people know different things about Hester, and the various things people know about her influence their judgment of her. Roger Chillingworth, for example, does not consider the scarlet letter so much a token of ignominy, as he deems it a constant reminder of the wrongs done unto him and the revenge he desires to correct those wrongs. When Chillingworth confronts Hester in jail and informs her of his plans to torture the man she consorted with, she asks why he did not wish to hurt her. He says that he has left her the scarlet letter and “ If that has not avenged me, I can do more” (155).

Chillingworth considers public humiliation one of the worst pains that someone else can inflict on a person and thus the scarlet letter, a public denunciation of Hester, becomes a symbol of revenge to him. The letter holds a more positive meaning for Dimmesdale, who considers it a declaration of relief. Dimmesdale hides many secrets in his heart, and he can

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only lust at the open announcement of guilt on Hester's chest. He affirms that "it must needs be better for the sufferer to be free to show his pain, as this poor woman Hester is, than to cover it up in his heart" (123).

Dimmesdale feels this way throughout the novel and eventually exclaims, "Happy are you, Hester, that wear the scarlet letter openly upon your bosom" (173).

Dimmesdale's envy for the scarlet letter's guilt-resolving power does not coincide with the town's desire for the letter to evoke contempt for the wearer. Whereas it is Dimmesdale's additional knowledge of Hester that causes him to interpret the letter differently than others, the governor's butler misconstrues the intended meaning of the letter because of his lack of knowledge of Hester. He surmises from "the glittering symbol in her bosom, that she was a great lady in the land" (95). The letter's elaborate designs appear stately to him. Unfortunately, for the Puritans, they want to convey the opposite idea, yet Hester undermines this purpose in her sumptuous creation of the scarlet letter.

While those people who know the history of the letter develop the "right" feelings about her, those who do not know anything about the letter could assume something different, as in the case of the governor's butler. Any judgment based on a physical attribute is subjective because people have varying levels of background knowledge on a given subject. The meteor passing over the sky also illustrates this principle. Hawthorne says that it passed through the sky "with no such shape as his guilty imagination gave it, or, at least, with so little definiteness, that another's guilt might have seen another symbol in it" (141). Nevertheless, two characters view the meteor as

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distinctive things because their experiences provide their minds with unique viewpoints.

In a community, even a small one such as the town from the *Scarlet Letter*, there is bound to be enough diversity in experience to lead to dissimilar perspectives on a physical object. As long as there is one person who sees something different in an object used as a symbol, such as the scarlet letter, the symbol will lose its power to dictate the thoughts and moral code of the society. The fact that Chillingworth, Dimmesdale, and the governor's butler all retain a distinct meaning from the scarlet letter indicates that it fails to unify the townspeople's thoughts. In addition, as time goes on the people accumulate more experiences and thus view the symbol differently from when they first view it.

This happens as the letter "A" shifts from conveying ignominy to ability to honor. The variability of the letter's meaning questions society's ability to fortify common values ideologically. Hawthorne emphasizes this to denounce the Puritans in their tendency to attempt to harness the diverse thoughts of many people into the "desirable" ideals dictated by the town magistrates. Hawthorne mocks the Puritans for their controlling nature because they fail in their purpose despite all of their effort.

Works Cited- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. New York City: Bantam Books, 2003.