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The True Meaning of Hester Prynne

“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 lifelong sorrow” (240). This passage was written by Nathaniel Hawthorne in his novel The Scarlet Letter. Many people look at their lives and think it is worse than it actually is. In the life of Hester Prynne this may not be the case. She lived a very hard life after she committed adultery and was treated without any respect for seven years. However, she got through it. Hester is a strong woman, and her strong characteristics can be compared to many symbols in the novel. The symbols that represent Hester Prynne are the scarlet letter ‘A’, the forest, and the rosebush by the prison door.

The first symbol that represents Hester is her scarlet letter. Hester is represented by the meaning of the scarlet letter; however, the meaning of the scarlet letter changes throughout the novel. In the beginning, the scarlet letter is the picture of adultery/sin, and she is reminded of it every day. People stare at her, talk about her in a negative fashion, and she is even used as

an example of sin in the church. The meaning of the scarlet letter begins to change to mean able. Seven years after Hester commits adultery, the townspeople begin to see that she is a good person. She helps make clothes for the poor out of the goodness of her heart; she is capable of being a good person. Hester's position changes so much that she is considered to be an angel or apostle in the town. She became a person for women to look up to; she would help to comfort women who "came to Hester's cottage, demanding why they were so wretched, and what the remedy!" (240-241). Hester not only becomes to symbolize the meaning of the scarlet letter, but she becomes the scarlet letter. Nathaniel Hawthorne made this comparison of Hester and the scarlet letter, "Hester looked, by way of humoring the child; and she saw that, owing to the peculiar effect of this convex mirror, the scarlet letter was represented in exaggerated and gigantic proportions, so as to be greatly the most prominent feature of her appearance. In truth, she seemed absolutely hidden behind it" (94). Although the scarlet letter is a small piece of clothing, the scarlet letter is Hester's most outstanding feature. The scarlet letter may also be considered a burden over Hester's heart. Hester's sin is the reason her whole life changed, and her scarlet letter is a daily reminder of the horrific change in the way she lives. The scarlet letter truly symbolizes Hester by its meaning, and the fact that Hester's life becomes the scarlet letter.

The forest also symbolizes the main character Hester Prynne. Like the scarlet letter the forest also represents sin. The Black Man is said to live in the forest and is the sole administrator of sin. When Pearl asked her mother if she ever had the honor of meeting the Black Man, Hester replied, "Once in my life I met the Black Man! . . . This scarlet letter is his mark!" (168). The forest doesn't only represent Hester's sin, but it symbolizes her freedom from her

sin. When she goes into the forest to stop Arthur Dimmesdale and talk to him, she is free to express how she truly feels. Hester is also able to experience freedom from the harshness of the townspeople. While she is in the forest, she doesn't have to endure the negative thoughts and actions of the unkind citizens around her. The forest also represents secrecy; the forest is like a lock box that holds all the secrets of the people who pass through it. This analogy can also be related to Hester. Hester holds all the secrets of her affair in her heart with no way to let the feelings escape. The forest holds all the secrets that Hester and Arthur shared with each other when they plan to run away together. The forest, in addition, is the first bystander to hear Hester admit who it was that fathered her child and how she actually feels about Arthur Dimmesdale. As well as holding Hester's secrets, the forest holds the feelings of Arthur and the true reason he is so close to death. Hester's character can truly be related to the underlying meaning of the forest.

Finally, Hester's life is represented by the rosebush. The rosebush located outside of the dark and dingy prison has "delicate gems . . . fragrance and fragile beauty" (42); this bush can be seen as a thing of beauty in a land of darkness. Hester is seen as a beautiful creature, but she is trapped in a place in her life where she is considered to be a disgusting disgrace to the citizens of Old Boston. The rosebush is, in addition, a symbol of kindness and love. Hawthorne writes that the symbol of the rosebush is to offer some happiness to a prisoner as they entered and hope to the prisoner who took their final steps in life. Hester's life also includes these qualities. Hester is the rosebush and her gem is her daughter Pearl. It is written that Hester loved Pearl dearly because Pearl was "purchased with all she had—her mother's only treasure!" (79). Everyday since Pearl came into Hester's life, she offered Pearl nothing but kindness and love. Hester demonstrates her kind ways to the people that are less fortunate than herself.

She made clothes for the poorer people of the town because she found it to be the right thing to do. Many people couldn't see past the darkness surrounding Hester to the beauty on the inside. This concept may also be compared to the rosebush. The rosebush was willing to give criminals a glance at hope and kindness; however, many may have not seen these kind ways past the darkness of their sins. In these ways, the rosebush shows a clear representation of Hester Prynne's life.

Hester Prynne was an amazing woman in the novel The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne. She holds many strong characteristics in the novel, and her distinctiveness can be seen through the scarlet letter 'A', the forest, and the rosebush by the prison door. Because of these symbols that Hester can be compared to, she holds an important place in American literature as the first heroine.

Works Cited

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. The Scarlet Letter. New York: Signet Classics, 1959.