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AP English 3 – *Scarlet Letter* Essay 1b

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### Hester's Change?

In the course of most stories, at least one of the main characters changes in one way or another. In *The Scarlet Letter*, one of the main characters we see a change in is Hester. Through the course of the novel, it appears that Hester changes from an arrogant, unremorseful woman to a much kinder and helpful, repentant woman. Although it appears that Hester has learned a lesson from her sin and consequential punishment, has she really changed her sinful ways? If she has, why, then, is she going to leave for Europe with Arthur Dimmesdale?

In the beginning of *The Scarlet Letter*, we see Hester being punished publicly for the sin she has committed with Arthur Dimmesdale. In chapter two, Hawthorne writes, "*he [the town-beadle] laid his right hand upon the shoulder of a young woman, whom he thus drew forward until, on the threshold of the prison-door, she repelled him, by an action marked with **natural dignity and force of character**, and stepped into the open air, as if by **her own free-will**."* Two paragraphs later, Hawthorne writes, "*And never had Hester Prynne **appeared more lady-like**, in the antique interpretation of the term, than as she issued from the prison. Those who had before known her, and **had expected to behold her dimmed and obscured** by a disastrous cloud, were astonished, and even startled, to perceive how **her beauty shone out**, and **made a halo** of the misfortune and ignominy in which she was enveloped."* At this first appearance to the townspeople, Hester acts as if nothing is wrong, as if she has chosen to appear before the people, rather than take it as a punishment. Hester's haughty appearance does not accurately reflect the way she is feeling on the inside. Right at the end of chapter two, Hawthorne writes, "*Could it be true? She clutched the child so fiercely to her breast, that it sent forth a cry; she turned her eyes downward at the scarlet letter, and even touched it with her finger, to assure herself that the infant and the **shame were real**. Yes!—**these were her realities**,—all else had vanished!"* Hester has no reason here to clutch the child fiercely or to question the reality of the events occurring if the ordeal is not affecting her on the inside.

After Hester is released from the prison and is living in the cottage, she is daily reminded of her shame and she is constantly hurting because of her punishment. When she walks around town, people look at her in a demeaning manner. In chapter five, Hawthorne writes, *“Another peculiar torture was felt in the gaze of a new eye. When strangers looked curiously at the scarlet letter,—and none ever failed to do so,—they branded it afresh into Hester’s soul; so that, oftentimes, she could scarcely refrain, yet always did refrain, from covering the symbol with her hand.”* Hester admits Pearl is her torture – in chapter six, Hawthorne writes, *“so infinite was the **torture inflicted by the intelligent touch of Pearl’s baby-hand.**”*

Not long after her punishment starts, Hester commences to help the needy by sewing clothing and helping them out in various other ways. After a few years of torture from the letter and from Pearl, Hester begins getting overly familiar with her punishment, and it no longer has the affect it once had. Her helpfulness causes people to give the meaning “able” to the letter, rather than “adulteress,” as it is supposed to mean. In the 3rd paragraph of chapter 13, Hawthorne writes, *“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 original signification. They said that it meant Abel; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman’s strength.”*

At this point in the novel, it appears that Hester has learned from her lesson and has changed her ways. Some even believe that her punishment is sufficient and that she should no longer wear the scarlet letter. A few pages later, Hawthorne writes on the 10<sup>th</sup> paragraph of chapter 13, *“The scarlet letter had not done its office.”* As the story continues, it becomes more and more evident that the scarlet letter hasn’t done its office – it hasn’t done what it was meant for. The letter and punishment were supposed to teach Hester to not sin, and yet she lies to Pearl about the meaning of the letter, another sin. In chapter 15, on the 27<sup>th</sup> paragraph, Hawthorne writes, *“In all the seven bygone years, Hester Prynne had never before been false to the symbol on her bosom.”* As the end of the story nears, Hester and Arthur discuss their plan to skip town for Europe. This is the point where it is most evident that Hester has not learned her lesson. Her living separately from Roger for 9-10 years does not annul their marriage. By running off with Arthur, she would be committing adultery again. Some people would argue that Roger and Hester were never married and, therefore, they didn’t commit adultery. In that case, they may not have committed adultery, but Hester still would have committed fornication, also a sin in God’s sight (Mark 7:21, Acts 15:20, among others).

At one point in the story, Hawthorne explains that Hester has learned much from the letter (ch 18 – “*The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread. Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers, —stern and wild ones, —and they had made her strong, but taught her much amiss.*”). Although Hester has changed in some ways, the change that was supposed to be brought about by the scarlet letter never happened. In the end, Hester was still planning to commit adultery again.