

THE SCARLET LETTER

Since the dawn of time people have read, studied and enjoyed books in which the hero or heroes fall from grace. No matter who those heroes are- the human race in The Bible, the demon prince Lestat in Anne Rice's "Vampire Chronicles" or a certain Thane of Cawdor in "Macbeth"- sin plays a great part in all of their downfalls and subsequent resurrections. And the three main characters in Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter"- Dimmesdale, Chillingworth, and Hester Prynne- are no different. All three characters are flung from the normal role that society has laid upon them- minister, housewife, doctor- into new roles- sinner, whore, and vengeance crazed sadist. These new roles are not necessarily apparent to all in town. However, even though the townspeople do not know of the sinners, God does. And in God's eyes, whose sin was greater? That, I cannot answer. But in this mere mortal's opinion, the sin of Chillingworth far outdid the sin of Dimmesdale or Hester Prynne, for Chillingworth's sin was one of revenge and one of secrecy. He was not driven by an anger at his own sin, but by the sin of others. He used deception and manipulation to make the life of another miserable. He was not flung from society's view as if he were a dirty secret like Hester was; he was embraced by it. However, his sin did take its toll. He was disfigured horribly and became a twisted man, scarred by sin. He also was robbed of the pleasure of destroying Dimmesdale which was his reason for living. He died shortly after Dimmesdale. Hester Prynne, however, was the complete opposite of Chillingworth in that her sin gave her life, not destroyed it. She took her punishment and embraced it, using it to rebuild herself not as a pathetic sinner, but as a pseudo-saint. At first, the town shunned her as a sinner. However, after they saw that she was good, and her sin was of love, the same town embraced and loved her. Her sin drew her more deeply into the society of Boston than she ever was before. And when her time to die came, she did so with honor. Hester Prynne - sinner and saint. However, Hester's sin was shared. Whereas she was a sinner on the outside and a saint on the inside, Arthur Dimmesdale is the reverse, both literally and figuratively. On the outside, a town minister, inside an adulterer. Of all the characters, Dimmesdale is the most pitiful. A man so penitent that he whips himself, but so afraid that he cannot confess his sin; a sin which takes a great toll on him. His countenance is disfigured in the shape of what we assume to be an A on his chest (that or a cow shaped birthmark) and his soul is eaten by his guilt. Arthur does later confess, and a weight is lifted from his being. And with that weight gone he finally dies in peace. Sin has always been and will always be a part of human life and literature. And as long as there is sin, people will react to it in different ways; some will hide it, some will embrace it, some will rot from it. But no matter how the sin is handled or dealt with, it will always leave its mark. For me, the mark of sin will always be symbolized as a scarlet A on a black background.

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