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Honors English 2

Ms. Hopkins

Period 2

Sin and Secrecy in *The Scarlet Letter*  
 In *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, the themes of sin and secrecy are present throughout the book. Through the lives of Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale, and Roger Chillingworth, Hawthorne uses a scarlet "A" to represent sin and secrecy, ultimately proving the importance of coming to terms with sin rather than hiding or ignoring it.

Hester Prynne is forced to wear a scarlet “A” on her chest as punishment for committing adultery, which, in Puritan society, was a major crime. Her sin was out in the open for all to see, and as a result, people were eventually able to look past it. When she first began to wear it, she was a source of gossip and humiliation, but as years passed, it began to be overlooked. Dimmesdale believes that “Hester Prynne [is] the less miserable for that scarlet letter on her breast” (92). If Hester had had to hide her sin for all those years, she would be unhappy and worried that someone would discover her secret, but instead the “scarlet letter on her breast” helped her move on. The letter eventually became a symbol of Hester's kindness and devotion to the community. The scarlet letter, “elsewhere a token of sin, was the taper of the sick-chamber...In [communal] emergencies, Hester's nature showed itself warm and rich; a well-spring of human tenderness, unfailing to every real demand” (111). The community comes to think of Hester as a good samaritan, and when they see her “A,” they think not of her sin but of her good deeds. Dimmesdale has a different experience.

Dimmesdale keeps his sin within himself, and takes it upon himself to eke out his punishment as horribly as he feels is necessary.

However, Hester has a secret sin as well that eats away at her happiness as well.

Despite all of the secrets that Hester revealed, the fact that Chillingworth is her husband was kept a secret. The “A” on her chest shows its shadow, a shadow made of secrets not yet divulged. It gnaws at Hester, until eventually she “became constant in her resolve to make known to Mr. Dimmesdale...the true character of the man [Chillingworth] who had crept into [Dimmesdale's] intimacy” (125). Once she comes clean to Dimmesdale about Chillingworth's true character and her affiliation with him, she feels a great weight lifted from her conscience.

* Dimmesdale
  + The “A” burnt into his chest represents hidden (secret) sin, and he is miserable and sick because of it
  + Quotes?
* Chillingworth
  + Chillingworth is obsessed with making sure that Dimmesdale is the man who cheated on him with his wife
  + As soon as he sees the “A” on Dimmesdale's chest, he becomes totally obsessed with making Dimmesdale miserable to pay for his crime
  + He keeps all of this a secret, and it eats him up and makes him turn to the devil
  + He interacts with the “A” constantly which is why it is an applicable symbol for him