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American Literature

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The Changeable Letter A

- I. The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne is overflowing with symbolism.
 - A. The Letter “A” is probably the most transitional symbol found in the book.
 - B. From shame to freedom, this oversized letter was seen and interpreted by society differently over time.
 1. Initially Hester Prynne was labeled with the oversized red letter to symbolize her adulterous action.
 2. When the Governor died, a meteor in the shape of the letter “A” was interpreted to represent his new angel status in Heaven.
 3. Years after Hester was forced to pin on the letter, her charity and kind acts toward the community had many others seeing the “A” as standing for able and capable.
- II. Adultery
 - A. Going back to Hester’s ceremonial placement of the letter “A” makes you think about the pain she suffered.
 - B.

1. “; 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!”
 2. Shame, embarrassment
 3. Ruined reputation for life in society
- C. The infamous letter “A” was initially planned for a lifetime of punishment.

III. Angel

- A. When Governor Winthrop passed away, a meteor flew through the night sky writing the letter “A” for all to see.
- B. “But did your reverence hear of the portent that was seen last night? A great red letter in the sky – the letter A, which we will interpret to stand for Angel. For, as our good Governor Winthrop was made an angel this past night, it was doubtless held fit that there should be some notice there of!”
1. All relative to the interpreter
 2. If you are seen as good then the letter stands for something good
- C. Regardless of evidence, the appearance of good was enough for society to see the Governor as being rewarded for his outwardly “perfect” behavior.

IV. Able

- A. Over time, Hester’s acts of charity and kindness through society caused people to look past the adultery and see her letter “A” as standing for able.
- B.
1. Excellent seamstress
 2. Generous to others

3. “It is our Hester – the town’s own Hester- who is so kind to the poor, so helpful to the sick, so comfortable to the afflicted.”

C. Hester’s genuine caring for others made society reconsider her shameful actions of the past considering her reformed.

V. Conclusion

A. The letter “A” is a symbol that continually transitions throughout the book.

B. From shame and punishment to eternal reward, the letter “A” represents different things depending on the circumstances of society.