

The Scarlet Letter

by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Teacher's Guide

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Synopsis

The Custom House

While working as surveyor at the Salem Custom House, Hawthorne discovers a red letter A and the events connected with it written on parchment by Surveyor Pue.

Chapter 1: The Prison Door

In Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1642, the Puritans of Boston gather before the city's wooden prison. Among the weeds that grow there sprouts a wild rose.

Chapter 2: The Market Place

In June at 10:00 A. M., the people await the public humiliation of Hester Prynne, an adulterer who, preceded by the beadle, exits the prison to display an embroidered red "A" pinned to the bodice of her dress. She carries a three-month-old child as she climbs unassisted to the pillory scaffold. While enduring the allotted time she is to stand before the disapproving women of Boston, she thinks about her life in England, her parents, and her marriage to an old, distinguished scholar. Her thoughts return to the present and the fellow Bostonians who shame her and consider her sentence too lenient.

Chapter 3: The Recognition

Hester sees a small, malformed man newly redeemed from captivity by Indians. She clutches the babe in horror after recognizing him. A man in the crowd informs her that Hester preceded her husband from Europe two years past, but has heard nothing from him. Because she has borne a child out of wedlock, she must stay three hours on the scaffold and must wear the embroidered letter all her life. The stranger divulges that he had a diffi-

cult passage and has been a captive of Indians. He is annoyed that Hester's lover does not share her shame and vows to reveal the man's identity.

Surrounded by Governor Bellingham and other authorities, the Reverend John Wilson, Boston's revered minister, looks down from a balcony and calls on Hester's pastor, Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, to instruct her to name the baby's father. The pale young man complies; Wilson also demands the name. Hester refuses both demands and calms the crying infant. The beadle returns her to her cell.

Chapter 4: The Interview

Hester nervously tries to soothe the baby, who contorts in pain. At evening, the jailer, Master Brackett, brings a doctor, Roger Chillingworth, to tend the baby. She hesitates to trust the doctor, who is really her husband, but his medication proves helpful. The child sleeps, but Hester still fears Chillingworth, who doses her with a sedative. As they talk, he bears no malice toward her, yet insists on identifying the child's father. She makes a vow that she will conceal the identity of Chillingworth, who makes ominous threats against the unnamed father.

Chapter 5: Hester at Her Needle

When Hester departs from prison, she remains on the outskirts of Boston at a thatched cottage on the coast. She works as a seamstress, making garments for women. Although her work is in demand, she remains a pariah and suffers constant harassment.

Chapter 6: Pearl

At age three, Pearl is a lovely, energetic child. Her mother dresses her in beautiful garments. Willful and mischievous, she reminds her mother of her own passions. Together, mother and daughter walk through the village, where Pearl pelts scornful chil-



dren with stones. In fantasy, she ponders her mother's scarlet "A." She requests that her mother account for her birth.

Chapter 7: The Governor's Hall

Hester is alarmed that Boston authorities may take Pearl. While delivering gloves to Bellingham, she intends to beg for Pearl, whom she has arrayed in a bright red dress embroidered in gold.

Chapter 8: The Elf-Child and the Minister

Bellingham, Wilson, and Dimmesdale enter along with Chillingworth, who has become the young man's personal doctor. Bellingham implies that Hester's choice of an ornate dress proves she is an unfit mother. He instructs Wilson to question Pearl about catechism. To his question "Who made thee?" she replies that she was plucked from the rose bush by the prison. Bellingham and Wilson insist on taking the child away when Hester protests that Pearl is a gift from God. She appeals to Dimmesdale for support.

The pale minister holds his hand over his heart as he concurs with Hester that Pearl is both a blessing and a token of her sin. Chillingworth notes the minister's earnest reply. Pearl touches the minister's hand; he kisses her head. Chillingworth implies that a study of the child's personality should indicate who the father is. On departure from the hall, Hester encounters the governor's sister, Mistress Hibbins, who invites her to a midnight gathering of witches. Hester declines but adds that, had she lost Pearl, she would gladly have signed Satan's book in her own blood.

Chapter 9: The Leech

Bostonians welcome Chillingworth as a physician and friend of Dimmesdale, whose health is delicate. The young minister willingly accepts the old man's treatment, but is prepared to die. Chillingworth resides in the minister's house in a separate apartment. Bostonians suspect that he practices satanic arts and fear that the minister is in danger. They trust that the good man will triumph over an agent of evil.

Chapter 10: The Leech and His Patient

Chillingworth fervently searches the minister's private thoughts to learn his secret. Dimmesdale comments that confession to God is not the same as public confession, which would alter a sinner's

standing in the community. As the two pose by a window, Hester and Pearl pass the nearby cemetery, where the child plucks burrs to arrange around the scarlet "A." Pearl looks up at the two watchers and hurls a burr at Dimmesdale. She notes that the "Black Man" may catch her mother and has already caught the minister. The old physician continues diagnosing the minister and declares he can never cure his illness until he confesses a secret sin. When Dimmesdale flees the room, Chillingworth smiles at the success of his interrogation. One day, Chillingworth finds Dimmesdale asleep and looks inside his vestment at his chest. Without divulging what he saw, Chillingworth gloats and dances ecstatically.

Chapter 11: The Interior of a Heart

Convinced he will triumph over his patient, the physician continues tormenting him. Dimmesdale fears and detests his companion without realizing the cruel psychological torture Chillingworth inflicts. The minister weakens, bringing empathy for his sufferings from his parishioners, who cherish their minister's goodness and his self-abasing sermons. Their adoration compels him to confess that he is Hester's lover and Pearl's father. In private, he abuses himself with a whip and keeps nightly vigils.

Chapter 12: The Minister's Vigil

On one Saturday night in May seven years after Hester's public humiliation, Dimmesdale stands on the scaffold and cries out in shame for his weakness. The wail draws the attention of Bellingham and his sister. Dimmesdale observes Wilson, who departs from the deathbed watch by Governor Winthrop without noticing the minister. Dimmesdale fantasizes that he freezes in place, where local people find him the next morning. He laughs at the image and hears a child's voice in reply. Hester and Pearl approach on their way home from Winthrop's bedside. They join the minister on the scaffold and embrace like a family. Pearl asks twice if he will stand at noon the next day with them. He replies that he will unite with them on Judgment Day. An A-shaped red light appears in the sky. Pearl points to Chillingworth, who stands smiling below.

The minister asks Hester to identify Chillingworth. As she promised, she keeps his secret. Pearl whispers nonsense to the minister. Chillingworth scolds

his patient for standing outdoors. The next morning, Dimmesdale performs well in the pulpit. The sexton recovers a glove that the minister left on the scaffold. The sexton comment that the red light in the sky was an "A" for "angel" in token of Winthrop's death. Dimmesdale pretends not to know of the phenomenon.

Chapter 13: Another View of Hester

Dimmesdale's decline alarms Hester. She, too, has changed, growing composed and compassionate toward the needy, ill, and troubled. Bostonians have forgotten their former spite and now think of the "A" as a protective amulet standing for "able." Less beautiful than before, she wears her hair under a cap as she goes about her charitable deeds. Pearl is the focus of her life. The child's unusual behavior worries her to the point that Hester wishes them both dead. She channels her concern into worry over Dimmesdale, who teeters on the edge of insanity. She blames Chillingworth's secret as the cause and determines to speak to him. One afternoon, she encounters him while she walks on the strand with Pearl.

Chapter 14: Hester and the Physician

Sending Pearl to entertain herself along the beach, Hester engages Chillingworth. He extols her good works and adds that the authorities may allow her to remove the red letter. She replies that the letter will vanish when she has served her penalty. She discerns evil in his face and tells him she fears their secret has harmed the minister. Chillingworth admits that he has turned himself into a demon by delighting in tormenting his companion. She claims her share of the guilt and begs to be released from the promise. Chillingworth leaves the choice to her.

Chapter 15: Hester and Pearl

When the physician withdraws to pick herbs, Hester acknowledges her hatred of him and believes that marrying her was even worse than his sin against Dimmesdale. Meanwhile, Pearl garbs herself in a make-believe cap and scarf made of seaweed and composes an "A" out of eelgrass. Hester asks if she understands the purpose of the letter. Pearl compares Hester's punishment to Dimmesdale's hand over his heart. Hester realizes that the child understands the mature situation, but Pearl gives no further evidence of awareness. Three times, she asks the purpose of the letter and

the minister's suffering. Hester considers telling Pearl about the crime of adultery, but cannot share the truth. She pretends not to understand the minister's suffering and to wear the embroidered letter for its gold detailing. Pearl continues questioning her the next morning until Hester threatens to lock her in a closet.

Chapter 16: A Forest Walk

For several days, Hester tries to locate Dimmesdale during his habitual walks. One day, after he spends the night with John Eliot, a missionary to local Indians, she takes Pearl to the forest to wait for Dimmesdale. Pearl continues her teasing by claiming that sunlight flickers through the shade to escape the scarlet "A." Pearl chases the beams, which disappear when Hester approaches. Pearl asks about Satan and repeats the old woman's claims that Satan put the letter on Hester's chest. Hester concurs that the "Black Man" did mark her.

As they sit on moss by a brook, Pearl notices her mother's sadness. Hester explains that Pearl would understand melancholy if she had experienced what her mother has endured. As Dimmesdale approaches, Pearl asks if the footsteps belong to Satan and if the minister covers Satan's mark on his heart. Pearl sings as she plays at the stream. Dimmesdale, leaning on his staff, seems dispirited as he approaches with his hand over his heart.

Chapter 17: The Pastor and His Parishioner

Dimmesdale is surprised to find the pair in the forest. The adults go deeper into the gloom and sit on the moss. At length, he asks if she has found peace. She replies that she knows only despair. He enlarges on his discomfiture that his parishioners idolize him without knowing of his secret sin. She replies that his repentance and goodness cancel sin. He claims that keeping his fatherhood secret is a torment. He longs for a confidante. She divulges that Chillingworth is an enemy posing as a friend. The confession jars Dimmesdale, who blames her for hiding the fact all these years. He eventually forgives her and declares the physician more sinful than the adulterers. Dimmesdale fears returning home and thinks of death as an escape. He begs her to strengthen him. She weeps to see his lowly state and presses him to leave Boston to settle elsewhere under an assumed name. He rouses to her challenge; she intends to accompany him from Boston.

Chapter 18: A Flood of Sunshine

Because Hester is more English than New World Puritan, she has no strong tie to Boston. Dimmesdale, in contrast, identifies with the Puritan ministry and code of conduct, but believes he can rely on her to help him make a new life elsewhere. She tosses the letter on the brookside and loosens her hair from the cap. The sun shines on their joy. Hester urges him to be a father to Pearl. Hester summons the child, who is decorating herself with wildflowers. She slowly approaches her parents.

Chapter 19: The Child at the Brookside

In the child's beauty, Hester sees a resemblance to the father. He has worried that local people would notice. Pearl rages and refuses to cross the brook until Hester pins the letter on her dress and covers her hair. Pearl kisses Hester and the letter. Hester explains that Dimmesdale loves them. Pearl asks if he will join them in public. Hester hedges that he will do so when they live together. Hester forces her to approach the minister. He kisses the child, but she washes the kiss away with brook water. The couple confirm their plans to leave Boston.

Chapter 20: The Minister in a Maze

As the trio depart, Hester plans to book passage for them on a ship from Spain bound for Bristol, England, in four days, the day after Dimmesdale delivers an Election Day address. He hurries into town in a brighter mood and fights the urge to shock a deacon, an old widow, a young girl, some children, and a drunken Spanish sailor. As he muses over his impulse, Mistress Hibbins speaks knowingly of his visit to the forest and promises to meet him in the forest at midnight.

Dimmesdale fears sin has compromised his soul. In his office, where he has spent two days writing a sermon, he feels strange. Chillingworth asks about the visit to the Indian village and prescribes medication to bolster him for Election Day. Dimmesdale refuses the dose and hints that he may be leaving Boston. When Chillingworth departs, the minister burns the original text and, writing all night, composes another.

Chapter 21: The New England Holiday

On Election Day, as Hester leads the excited Pearl to town, she exults in a flight that will end her family's misery. Pearl questions why the crowd appears in Sunday attire. Hester explains that an entourage

of prominent people will pass through Boston. Pearl wonders if Dimmesdale will walk in the procession and will greet them. Hester warns her not to address the minister. Pearl is confused by the man's duplicity. As sailors, Indians, and Puritans gather, Chillingworth enters with the ship captain. He speaks to Hester and comments that Chillingworth is also a passenger bound for Bristol. Chillingworth smiles knowingly at Hester.

Chapter 22: The Procession

As Hester ponders the implications of the four of them fleeing together, the procession begins with military band, militia in armor, local authorities, and Dimmesdale, walking so firmly and confidently that Pearl does not recognize him. Hester shushes Pearl's silly chatter. Mistress Hibbins approaches and implies that Dimmesdale conceals satanic evil in his heart. The service begins in the meeting house. Hester, standing beside the scaffold, hears Dimmesdale's sorrowing tone, but can't make out his words.

On her own, Pearl frolics near the Indians. The captain is taken with her joy. He tries to kiss her and tosses her a gold chain from his hat. As she wraps it around her, he sends her with a message to Hester that the doctor will escort the minister to the ship. The words dismay Hester. Passersby stare at the scarlet letter, but admire the minister without realizing his secret sin.

Chapter 23: The Revelation of the Scarlet Letter

When the service ends, the congregation emerges in jubilation at Dimmesdale's powerful sermon. At the height of his power, he appears to be dying. As the entourage assembles to proceed to a feast at the town hall, praise rings out for the minister. Feebly, he wavers on his feet. Wilson offers his arm, but Dimmesdale pushes him aside and joins Hester and Pearl at the scaffold. Bellingham pauses in the act of assisting the minister, who summons his family. Dimmesdale rejects the physician's aid and asks Hester to escort him up the steps. Chillingworth realizes that Dimmesdale has eluded his evil power.

Dimmesdale divulges that he is expiring and must confess to the crowd. He declares that his breast bears proof of sin. He tears his ministerial garb and reveals the mark before collapsing. Hester holds his head as Dimmesdale prays for Chillingworth's sin.

He requests a kiss from Pearl, who weeps. The minister says goodbye to Hester. She asks if they will unite in heaven. He fears that they have no hope of eternal happiness and dies praising God. The Puritans murmur their respect and wonder.

Chapter 24: Conclusion

The author comments that witnesses, out of loyalty to the minister, reported different versions of the events: they report no mark and deny that he said anything about Hester. The author exhorts the reader to be truthful by revealing private sin to the world. Chillingworth dies within the year. Pearl inherits Chillingworth’s property. Hester takes her to Europe, where the girl marries and has a child. Hester returns several years later and voluntarily pins on the scarlet letter. Wise in her suffering, she advises local women about their concerns and suffering. At her death, her remains are buried near Dimmesdale’s grave. On her black slate monument, a letter A shines.

Timeline

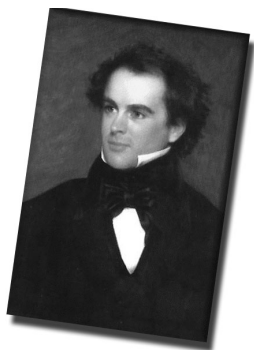
- 1620** Pilgrims found the Plymouth Colony.
- 1628** John Endecott and other colonists comprise an outpost of the Massachusetts Bay Company.
- 1629** Roger Williams leads the first Puritan Congregational Church.
- 1637** Pequot War: Colonists defeat Pequot Indians; the survivors of the tribe are enslaved.
- 1640** Hester sails from Amsterdam to the Massachusetts Bay Colony.
- later** Roger Chillingworth departs for America and is captured by Indians.
- 1641** Hester conceives a child by Dimmesdale.
- March 1642** Pearl is born; Hester is jailed for adultery.
- June** She must display a red “A” on her dress and stand on the pillory scaffold. Chillingworth arrives in Boston.
- 1645** Governor Bellingham threatens to take Pearl from her mother. Dimmesdale speaks in Hester’s defense.
- later** Mistress Hibbins invites her to a witches’ gathering.
- one day** Chillingworth looks inside Dimmesdale’s vestment at his secret punishment.
- May 1649** Dimmesdale stands on the scaffold and embraces Hester and Pearl. After

- next day** Governor Winthrop’s death, an A-shaped red light appears in the sky. The sexton recovers a glove from the scaffold. Dimmesdale pretends not to know about the red light.
- one afternoon** Chillingworth admits that he torments Dimmesdale. He leaves up to Hester whether she keeps his identity a secret.
- next morning** Hester threatens to lock Pearl in a closet for teasing her about the scarlet letter.
- several days later** Dimmesdale spends the night with missionary John Eliot.
- next day** Hester awaits Dimmesdale in the forest. The couple plan to leave Boston by ship.
- three days later** Dimmesdale burns his Election Day sermon and writes another one.
- next day** Sailors, Indians, and Puritans gather on Election Day. The ship captain reveals that Chillingworth is also sailing to Bristol. Dimmesdale succeeds at his sermon.
- later** The entourage assembles to proceed to a feast at the town hall. Dimmesdale climbs the scaffold to reveals the mark on his chest.
- 1650** Chillingworth dies; Pearl inherits his property. Hester takes her to Europe.
- 1652 later** Salem is established in Massachusetts. Pearl marries and has a child. Hester returns to Boston.
- 1740s** Jonathan Edwards leads a revival of Puritanism.
- 1839** Hawthorne works at the Boston custom house.
- 1841** Hawthorne lives at Brook Farm.
- 1846** Hawthorne is surveyor at the Salem custom house.

Author Sketch

The most famous of the New England intelligentsia, Nathaniel Hawthorne, a descendent of New England Puritans who persecuted accused witches, was born in Salem on July 4, 1804. His mother lived in poverty on a farm in Raymond, Maine, after 1808, when her husband, a sea captain, died in Surinam from yellow fever. Supported by his Manning relatives, Hawthorne attended

Bowdoin College and graduated at age twenty-one. Back home with his mother, he retreated into solitude for twelve years to write stories and poems, which he issued anonymously. In 1828 with his own funds, he published *Fanshawe*, his first novel. After its failure, he contributed more short pieces to *The Token* and edited *The American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge*. When a collection, *Twice-Told Tales*, flourished in London, Hawthorne remained unappreciated at home.



At age thirty-five, Hawthorne took the job of custom's agent for the port of Boston, where he weighed and taxed goods for two years. For six months, he settled on the Brook Farm commune west of Boston, lived with idealistic transcendentalists, and wrote more stories. After moving to the "Old Manse" in Concord in 1842 with his wife, Sophia Peabody Hawthorne, he produced short pieces for the *Democratic Review*. He returned to work as Salem's customs surveyor during the term of James K. Polk. With the issuance of *The Scarlet Letter*, he began publishing more frequently, including *The Blithedale Romance*, a satire based on his months at the experimental farm. For eighteen months, he lived near Lenox and enjoyed the friendship of Herman Melville, who dedicated *Moby Dick* to him.

After moving to Concord in 1852, Hawthorne composed a biography of his schoolmate, Franklin Pierce. When Pierce was elected president, he rewarded Hawthorne for campaigning for him by appointing him as U.S. consul in Liverpool. During his four years in England, he published more stories, then traveled to Italy, where he acquired notes for *The Marble Faun*. Back in Concord, he published articles in *Atlantic Monthly*. Sick and depressed, he died in Plymouth, New Hampshire, on May 19, 1864.

Critic's Corner

Throughout his life, Hawthorne, a sixth-generation New Englander, was aware of his family's ties with seventeenth-century torture and condemnation of supposed witches. After graduating from college, he altered the spelling of the family name to Hawthorne to distance himself from Judge John

Hathorne, his notorious ancestor. Hawthorne's free-floating guilt colors his fiction, which Sophia Hawthorne published after his death. His fame as a symbolist grew as critics and readers embraced the layered meaning concerning the intertwining of good and evil in human character. Labeled a humanist and a pessimist, Hawthorne challenged the heart with his questions about the heroic and ignoble nature that both uplifts and condemns humanity.

Readers may struggle with the ponderous philosophy of *The Scarlet Letter*, which unfolds events slowly and methodically, forcing the reader to return to the Puritan mindset and details from colonial history. Fellow New Englanders who read Hawthorne marveled at his genius and polished style while they disapproved of his interest in two local adulterers. A *cause célèbre* in Massachusetts, the novel was a pioneer effort in psychological melodrama that demands concentration and empathy from the reader for maximum understanding. Twentieth-century feminists return to the figure of Hester and her scarlet A for proof that the castigation of women in witch trials and pillorying was an outgrowth of religious fanaticism and Puritanic disdain for women and sex.

Hawthorne's Other Works

Fanshawe (1828)
Twice-Told Tales (1837)
Grandfather's Chair (1841)
Famous Old People (1841)
Liberty Tree (1841)
Biographical Stories (1842)
Mosses from an Old Manse (1846)
The House of the Seven Gables (1851)
Wonder Book (1851)
The Snow Image (1852)
The Life of Franklin Pierce (1852)
The Blithedale Romance (1852)
Tanglewood Tales (1853)
The Marble Faun (1860)
Our Old Home (1863)
Septimius Felton (1872)
The Dolliver Romance (1876)
Doctor Grimshawe's Secret (1882)
The Ancestral Footstep (1883)
The American Notebooks (1932)
The English Notebooks (1941)

Related Reading

Isabel Allende, *House of the Spirits*
 Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*
 Ambrose Bierce, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"
 Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*
 Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*
 Walter Van Tilburg Clark, *The Ox-Bow Incident*
 Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*
 Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*
 Bette Greene, *Summer of My German Soldier*
 Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*
 Ruthanne Lum McCunn, *Thousand Pieces of Gold*
 Arthur Miller, *The Crucible*
 Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*
 Elizabeth Speare, *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*
 Amy Tan, *The Kitchen God's Wife*
 Corrie ten Boom, *The Hiding Place*
 Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*
 Jessamyn West, *Except for Me and Thee*

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 Johnson, Claudia Durst. *Understanding the Scarlet Letter*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1995.
 Whitlaw, Nancy. *Nathaniel Hawthorne, American Storyteller*. New York: Morgan Reynolds, 1996.

General Objectives

1. To define conventions of psychological fiction
2. To describe the physical, mental, and emotional effects of religious fanaticism
3. To pinpoint sources of shame, guilt, depression, and despair
4. To characterize the lifestyle of a husbandless young wife in a community of religious fanatics

5. To list ways in which religion oppresses people
6. To define adultery and illegitimacy
7. To account for suicide, self-torment, and flight as pervasive themes
8. To assess the harm of marrying an inappropriate spouse
9. To isolate moments of disillusion, foreboding, loss, and idealism
10. To account for rumor and innuendo among facts

Specific Objectives

1. To summarize the influence of adultery on Hester and Pearl
2. To compare Dimmesdale's roles as pastor and father
3. To characterize Chillingworth after seven years with Dimmesdale
4. To evaluate a public confession on the scaffold
5. To list events that destroy the escape plan
6. To explain why citizens revile Hester at the pillory
7. To account for the changes in meaning of the "A"
8. To contrast Dimmesdale and Chillingworth as mates for Hester
9. To analyze Nathaniel Hawthorne's objectivity
10. To explain why local women idolize the young minister

Literary Terms and Applications

For a better understanding of the novel, present the following terms to *The Scarlet Letter*:

Dénouement: the falling action or unraveling of the suspenseful elements of a melodramatic plot, as found in the Election Day sermon and the collapse of Hester's plan to flee Boston with Pearl and Dimmesdale and start a new life in England. Although Chillingworth withholds his comments, the captain unknowingly passes a message to Hester that Dimmesdale will not escape the vengeance of her lawful husband. However, when Dimmesdale bravely faces confession and death on the scaffold, he foils the physician's plan to continue tormenting his victims.

Prologue: an introductory section, speech, or peroration that presents a theme or action. “The Custom House” introduces the seventeenth century from Hawthorne’s perspective two hundred years after the historical event. By pretending to locate an antique parchment written by a civic clerk who weighs and measure goods, the author introduces the motif of evaluation, which dominates the story of Hester Prynne and her adultery. The backward glance at Boston history allows Hawthorne to detail the rise and fall of Puritanism, a belief system that dominated his family history and continued to haunt his adult life.

Psychological Novel: an extreme form of the character novel which focuses on the mental landscape, as demonstrated by Chillingworth’s intent on tormenting Dimmesdale and Dimmesdale’s private self-flagellation to rid himself of secret sin. Significant to psychological fiction is a necessary disburdening, which takes place in its first stage at the brookside as Hester lets down her hair and removes the letter and Dimmesdale reunites with Hester and attempts to love Pearl as a father should. The final stage occurs at the scaffold, where the couple’s mental anguish spills over in public and ends local speculation on Hester’s sin, Pearl’s parentage, Chillingworth’s purpose in shadowing Dimmesdale, and the young minister’s dwindling body and heavy heart.

The Importance of Setting

The action of *The Scarlet Letter* illustrates its effect on a small Massachusetts village by imprisoning three sufferers in an accusing milieu governed by religious piety. Opening on a stark iron and wood prison brightened by one wild rose, the scene forces an imprisoned woman into the harsh light of public scrutiny. Elevated on the scaffold, she stands in full view of passersby and gazes beyond scoffers and disapproving matrons to a dreamy past in England, where she enjoyed happiness with her parents and looked forward to marriage with a scholar. When the authorities appear opposite her on a balcony, their deliberate distancing of their piety from the display of sin below implies that they have a right to demand her confession to adultery and insist she divulge the name of her partner.

When the action moves back into the jail, Hester can display softness and vulnerability as she relaxes from the shame of pillorying. Alarmed by the sudden appearance of her husband, she cringes from his dark, cruel complexion and his touch on the crying infant, who has endured three hours of public display. The administering of sedatives creates a momentary tension as Hester wonders whether he is vindictive enough to poison her and the infant.

The ease of Hester’s movements at her seaside cottage and in town after she gains her freedom belies the continued scrutiny of Puritans as she appears with scarlet “A” on her breast, proclaiming the sin of adultery. The welter of stares and scorn bubbles over into stones thrown at Pearl and threats aimed at Hester to remove the child from her custody. In the sumptuous quarters of Governor Bellingham, she awaits like a powerless sacrificial animal as the reigning patriarchs ponder her fate. Relieved once more, she visits with Chillingworth in the freedom of the seaside, where Pearl can play in peace and Hester can speak her mind.

The ins and outs of Hester’s business and charitable visits chronicle her growth from public ignominy to seamstress and ministering angel. During her meeting with Dimmesdale on the scaffold by night, the cloak of darkness allows them to ponder their fate apart in the midst of public scorn. The private meeting in the forest once more frees Hester to speak her mind and to consider a reprieve from Boston’s judgment.

Dramatic tension mounts as the Election Day procession enters the marketplace. In close proximity, scaffold and meeting house imply the control of religious fanatics over all elements of life, even the passage of a ship to Bristol. When Hester realizes that the escape plan is ruined and Dimmesdale doomed, she joins him in the appropriate place—at the scaffold, where the story begins.

Cross-Curricular Sources

For more information about Boston history, Puritanism, theocracy, sermons, Hawthorne, and other subjects and issues, consult these sources:

The Culture of English Puritanism, St. Martin's Press
The Devil in Massachusetts, Anchor
A Jonathan Edwards Reader, Yale University Press
Major Characters in American Fiction, Henry Holt
McGregor, Deborah Kuhn, "'Childbirth-Travells' and 'Spiritual Estates': Anne Hutchinson and Colonial Boston, 1634-1638,"
Caduceus, 1989, 1-33.
The Scarlet Letter (film)
Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God"

Also, consult this website:
"The Scarlet Letter" (film),
<http://www.eonline.com/Facts/Movies/0,60,42275,00.html>.

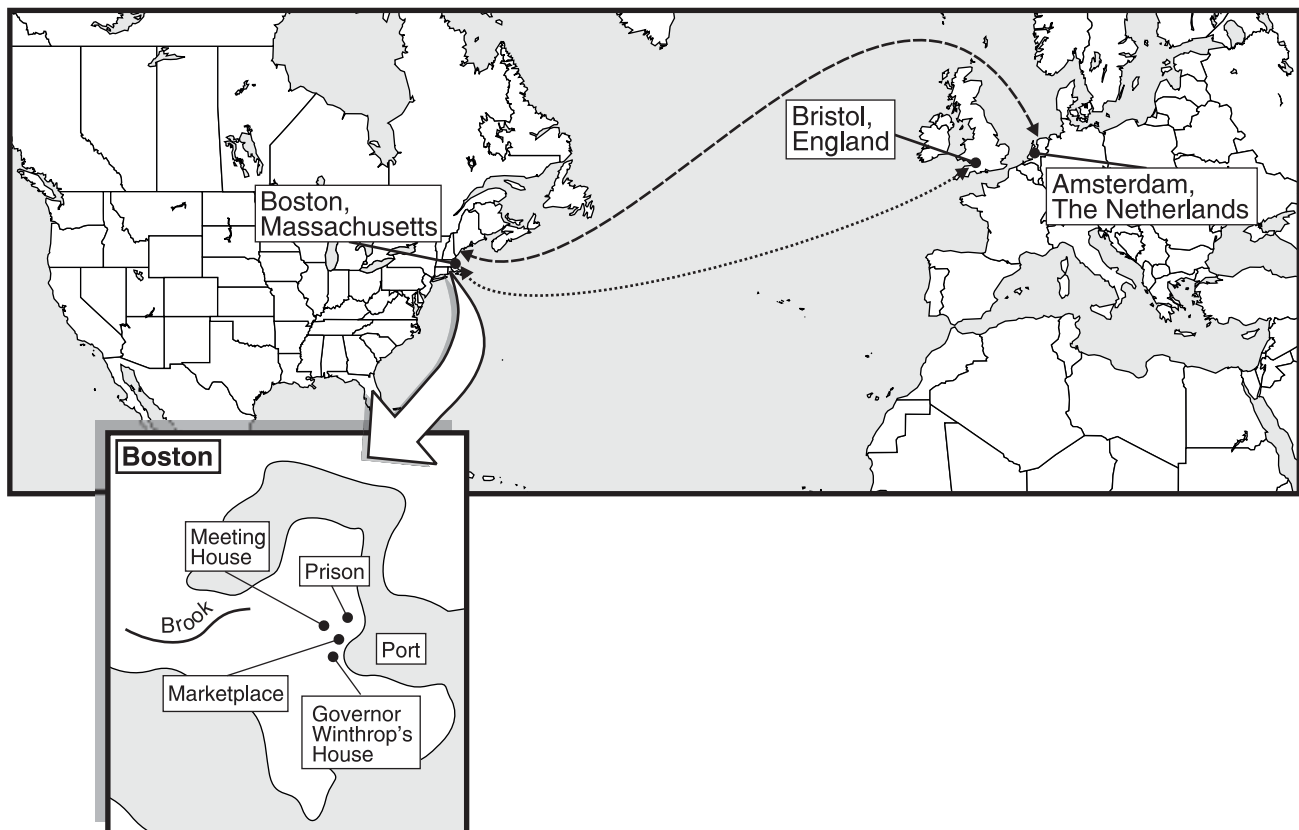
Themes and Motifs

Themes

- fanaticism
- solitude
- separation
- misjudgment
- mother hood
- torment
- vengeance
- endurance
- service
- flight

Motifs

- punishment for sexual impropriety
- mob mentality
- misogyny
- self-righteousness



Meaning Study

Below are words, phrases, sentences, or thought units that have a particular meaning in the novel. Explain each. Chapter and page numbers are given so that you can note the context from which the item is taken.

1. This personage prefigured and represented in his aspect the whole dismal severity of the Puritanic code of law, which it was his business to administer in its final and closest application to the offender. (Chap. 2, p. 50)
(Puritan law concerns itself not only with criminal and civil justice, but moral behavior as well. A rigid body of laws strictly regulates all aspects of daily life in Boston. This code carries penalties for minor offenses, such as laughter on the Sabbath and profane language, both punishable by public scorn. Since the early colonial village is a theocracy, the magistrates who sit in judgment are also church leaders. Because church and state are the same structure, they make no distinction between religious and civil law and authority.)
2. In fact, this scaffold constituted a portion of a penal machine, which now, for two or three generations past has been merely historically and traditionary among us, but was held, in the old time, to be as effectual an agent in the promotion of good citizenship as ever was the guillotine among the terrorists of France. It was, in short, the platform of the pillory; and above it rose the framework of that instrument of discipline, so fashioned as to confine the human head in its tight grasp, and thus hold it up to the public gaze. (Chap. 2, p. 53)
(A scaffold at the western extremity of the Boston marketplace is the platform on which the pillory stands. It is upon this scaffold that Hester and her baby first endure three hours of public scorn and condemnation. Seven years later, Dimmesdale stands upon the same platform and at the same pillory to confess that he is Hester's secret lover. Thus the pillory provides a symbolic frame for the entire story by placing both sinners in the public eye.)
3. Mother and daughter stood together in the same circle of seclusion from human society; and in the nature of the child seemed to be perpetuated those unquiet elements that had distracted Hester Prynne before Pearl's birth, but had since begun to be soothed away by

the softening influences of maternity. (Chap. 6, p. 91)

(Hester's public shame symbolized by the scarlet letter has made her an outcast from Boston. Since the authorities have branded her a sinful woman, none of the good citizens will socialize with her. They will accept her needlework and her charity, but not her friendship. Hester's ostracism extends to Pearl, whom children scorn and revile.)

4. And Pearl, overhearing the ejaculation, or aware through some more subtle channel of those throbs of anguish, would turn her vivid and beautiful little face upon her mother, smile with sprite-like intelligence, and resume her play. (Chap. 6, pp. 92-93)
(By referring to Pearl as sprite-like, the author suggests a playful buoyant spirit usually intent on mischief. Pearl is often mischievous, and her behavior is inconsistent with the Puritan ideal of how children should behave. Frequently, Hawthorne calls her an elf-child. In one passage, he describes her as a "nymph-child" or an "infant dryad," thus linking her to woods beings from Greek mythology. Such supernatural creatures derive from lore that Puritans would have condemned as satanic stories. Even Hester fears that Pearl is marked by sin and may display "some dark and wild peculiarity, that should correspond with the guiltiness to which she owed her being.")
5. As the last touch to her mermaid's garb, Pearl took some eelgrass, and imitated, as best she could, on her own bosom, the decoration with which she was so familiar on her mother's. (Chap. 15, p. 174)
(The choice of eelgrass for Pearl's imitation letter is an evocative metaphor that links the illicit lovers to Eden. The eel, like the snake that corrupted a paradise on earth by tempting Eve, suggests that Pearl, like her mother, is capable of giving in to temptation. Although her hand-made letter is a green, living plant rather than a letter embroidered in red and gold, the gesture forebodes experimentation and creativity on the part of Pearl. Hawthorne hints that the child may grow up rebellious toward Puritanism and find fulfillment in nature.)
6. "But in good earnest now, Mother dear, what does this scarlet letter mean?—and why dost thou wear it on thy bosom?—and why does the minister keep his hand over his heart?" (Chap. 15, p. 175)
(Earlier, Hawthorne reveals Dimmesdale's peculiar habit. Unlike Hester, who wears her scarlet letter openly on her chest, he conceals his sin from public view. His hidden anguish sears his heart so terribly that he suffers both physical and spiritual torment. The precocious Pearl makes an intuitive connection between her

mother's letter and Dimmesdale's hand over his heart and concludes that "the Black Man set his mark in that place." After the public revelation of adultery and the tearing away of the ministerial band from his chest, spectators testify that they saw a letter imprinted on his flesh. Some whisper that it derives from the "tooth of remorse, gnawing from the inmost heart outwardly and at last manifesting Heaven's dreadful judgment by the visible presence of the letter.")

7. "Of penance, I have had enough! Of penitence, there has been none!" (Chap. 17, p. 188) *(In interpreting his situation, Dimmesdale differentiates between penance and penitence. Obviously, he thinks of penance as suffering and punishment he imposes on himself in the private scourging in his closet. True penitence, on the other hand, requires resolution to atone and a willingness to confess to all society. Venerated by parishioners as a saint, he lacks the courage to confess his adultery. Since he is a sincerely pious man, he suffers the agony of the damned as a result of his cowardly and hypocritical silence, which leaves his lover and child to bear all the public humiliation and ostracism without his support.)*
8. ... his mind was darkened and confused by the very remorse which harrowed it; that, between fleeing as an avowed criminal, and remaining as a hypocrite, conscience might find it hard to strike the balance... (Chap. 18, p. 197) *(Hawthorne typifies a hypocrite as one who pretends to be good or pure or honest but is really just the opposite. A hypocrite gives lip service to a particular morality or value system while hiding crimes or sins behind a pious or innocent facade. Dimmesdale's parishioners believe him to be pious and saintly. He allows them to honor and adore him while nightly flogging himself with a whip for his secret adultery.)*
9. "Hadst thou sought the whole earth over," said he, looking darkly at the clergyman, "there was no one place so secret—no high place nor lowly place where thou couldst have escaped me—save on this very scaffold!" (Chap. 23, pp. 248-249) *(Chillingworth, who is obsessed with vengeance, has no desire to see the secret lover either dead or publicly condemned. By concealing his subtle sadism while posing as friend and personal physician, he can insinuate himself into the minister's life and continue to torment him. Using all his skill, Chillingworth strives to keep the man alive and, at the same time, increase his suffering through refined mental manipulation. When he books passage on the ship to Bristol, he obviously intends to prolong his hold on the minister. Thus, Dimmesdale achieves freedom by taking the one escape that Chillingworth can't control.)*

10. It is a curious subject of observation and inquiry, whether hatred and love be not the same thing at bottom. (Chap. 24, p. 255) *(In conclusion, the author theorizes that hatred and love are basically the same emotion. Either may be extreme to the point of harm. Unbridled love frequently generates possessiveness and jealousy. The jealous lover can be as cruelly vindictive as the hate-filled enemy. As Hawthorne observes, the passionate lover and the passionate hater both depend on the object for their love or hatred. When the object is gone or out of reach, both the lover and hater feel forlorn and frustrated.)*

Comprehension Study

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages in the play.

Questions 1-5 (Literal Level)

1. What is Chillingworth's reaction to Hester's crime? *(When Chillingworth first appears, he is an unidentified stranger recently released from Indian captivity and attending the public humiliation of Hester Prynne on the scaffold of the Boston marketplace. His face contorts in "writhing horror" as he recognizes his young wife. Upon learning that her partner is unnamed, he states, "It irks me, nevertheless, that the partner of her iniquity should not, at least, stand on the scaffold by her side. But he will be known!" By applying his skill as a physician, he gains entry to her jail cell. Bent on vengeance, he insists that she keep secret his identity. Thus, Hester is custodian of two secrets about the men in her life.)*
2. Why does Hester remain in Boston? *(In so tense a personal situation, Hester has several reasons for remaining among people who revile and persecute her and her daughter. She comments that she still feels connected to Dimmesdale and that their union "would bring them together before the bar of final judgment, and make that their marriage-altar, for a joint futurity of endless retribution." Less clear is her compulsion to believe "half a truth and half a self-delusion." She cherishes Boston both as the "scene of her guilt" and the "scene of her earthly punishment." She surmises that the daily shame will eventually rid her soul of impurity. The most likely reason, however, is that she can still see Dimmesdale. After his death, she and Pearl depart for Europe because there is nothing in Boston to keep them there.)*

3. Who is the "Black Man"?
(Allusions to the "Black Man" recur throughout the text as the obvious term for Satan. Colonial Bostonians associate him with the wild and savage forest, where he purportedly presides over witches' covens. To Puritans, the Black Man is both real and very much alive. His presence is a constant threat to order and godliness, which, to Puritans, are synonymous.)
4. Describe Hester's relationship with Pearl.
(Hester loves her infant, yet regards Pearl as the living embodiment of the scarlet letter, a symbol of sin. When Governor Bellingham considers taking Pearl from her, she tries to explain that "God gave me the child! . . . He gave her in requital of all things else, which he had taken from me. She is my happiness! . . . she is my torture, none the less! . . . She is the scarlet letter.")

Hawthorne leaves Pearl's destiny somewhat shrouded in mystery. In the conclusion of the novel, he hints that Pearl may have found happiness as a young wife in England. When Hester returns to Boston after many years, she receives letters "with armorial seals upon them." From this evidence, readers may assume that Pearl has married a European nobleman. Although mother and daughter dwell on opposite shores of the Atlantic in widely disparate circumstances, they remain in touch.)

5. Describe changes in Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth.
(At the opening of the story, Hester is a young woman of an "impulsive and passionate nature." As she stands on the scaffold in the marketplace, the silent condemnation of the populace so torments her that she feels "as if she must needs shriek out with the full power of her lungs, and cast herself from the scaffold down upon the ground, or else go mad at once." With the passing of years, she learns to endure quietly her outcast status, earn a living through needlework, and gain limited acceptance from the community for her charity and good works. Her solitary life forces reliance upon inner resources. Consequently, after wearing the letter for seven years, she tempers her character through adversity into a mature strength.)

Dimmesdale, unlike Hester, basks in local regard as a saint and true minister of God as cowardice weakens him physically, morally, and spiritually. The community regrets his severe physical declines as "his form grew emaciated." They admire his sermons, despite the fact that "his voice, though still rich and sweet, had a certain melancholy prophecy of decay in it." His physical decline is merely the outward manifestation of his spiritual decay as secret guilt and shame destroy him. Several opinions explain his worsening condition, yet no one seems to suspect the truth.

Chillingworth is another character whose outward appearance reflects a drastic inner decline. The first impression he creates is the meditative scholar with a malformed body. As the minister shrivels from hypocrisy, so Chillingworth warps himself through obsession with vengeance. The evil in his heart reflects on his face into "something ugly and evil . . . which they had not previously noticed, and which grew still the more obvious to the sight the oftener they looked upon him." As though transformed into a demon laden with evil, he interjects himself into the death scene as though "thrust from some nether region.")

Questions 6-8 (Interpretive Level)

6. How does Hester try to rescue Dimmesdale?
(After seven years of keeping secret the identity of Pearl's father and the whereabouts of her husband, Hester realizes that silence may harm more than it benefits. She observes Dimmesdale's terrible decline and knows that his decline results from the leech's subtle powers. Hester realizes that Chillingworth has identified her partner in adultery and, while pretending to be a friend and physician, intensifies the mental torment that Dimmesdale imposes on himself. She resolves to tell Dimmesdale that the physician, a man he values as a friend, is really her husband and an insidious enemy. In the privacy of the brookside, she urges him to escape by fleeing to the wilderness or returning to Europe to a future "yet full of trial and success." Optimistically, she exults, "There is happiness to be enjoyed!")

When Dimmesdale confesses that he lacks courage to start anew, she offers to accompany him. At this point, she and Dimmesdale hope to escape the consequences of sin. By taking control of their dilemma, she intends to escort him to a secular world where he can make his way apart from Puritanic control. The offer indicates how seven years of hardship have strengthened her and sustained her love for Pearl's father, even though he has given her no support nor borne his share of the blame for adultery.)

7. Explain prominent symbols.
(The strongest image, the scarlet letter, is both repellent and gorgeous, "fantastically embroidered and illuminated." Edged in gold, it is the one bit of color of Hester's otherwise drab costume. It abbreviates the crime of adultery to the ambiguous letter "A." As an outward sign of condemnation, it sets her apart, branding her as an outcast.)

While Hester publicly wears the badge of shame, the minister secretly brands himself with an inner scarlet letter. During his secret vigil on the scaffold, he beholds a meteor that appears in the shape of a dull red letter "A." He interprets it as a heavenly manifestation and recognition of his sin. The sexton, who reports the phenomenon, regards it as a portent signifying that Governor Winthrop has become an angel. The interpretation

anticipates the changing symbolic significance of Hester's badge. Years later, she returns to her cottage and once more wears the letter. Because of her goodness and exemplary life, citizens forget the negative meaning and regard the letter as a symbol for able, apostle, or angel.

A second symbol, the scaffold, constitutes a portion of the penal machine where malefactors stand before public condemnation. It is a focus for the sin-obsessed Puritans of Boston and stands for confession and punishment. Hester begins penance on the scaffold in the marketplace and returns late one night to find Dimmesdale subjecting himself to a silent, dark-enshrouded punishment that he generates from within without the help of townspeople. Seven years later, her lover, leaning on her arm, ascends the same scaffold to make his confession and, with his last bit of strength, to subject himself to public judgment.

The forest, Hester and her lover's retreat for private communion, is a two-sided retreat that allies with the cleansing brook and sunbeams as well as with Mistress Hibbins and superstitions about the Black Man and witches. Boston, like a tiny Puritan island lost in a vast and frightening wilderness, believes that forest denizens include Indians and normal beasts as well as demons and witches. To suspicious Puritans, the woods are a dark and savage locale where souls may cavort in bestial revelry. As a great unknown, it loses its value as a part of nature and becomes the province of Satan and sin.

Unlike the shadowy forest, the marketplace, a symbol of commerce and civilization, becomes the lighted gathering spot for Puritans, sailors, Indians, and others passing through the town. On holidays, people gather there for public events.)

8. Characterize the theme of forgiveness.

(Significant to Christianity is the concept of forgiveness. Hester's guilt, demonstrated by the baby she nestles on the scaffold, gradually ebbs and strengthens her soul. Her spiritual health derives from self-forgiveness and a will to rear a child and make a living to support her family of two. On the far extreme dwells her lover, who drives himself into hypocrisy and sham religiosity that ultimately erodes his character. As he acquires the respect of parishioners, he gradually shrivels into a body too weak to contain the unforgiven sin that thrives within.

Attendant on the theme of forgiveness is the miserable human condition wrought by isolation and alienation. Because Hester isolates herself from the community, she gains forgiveness through a limited involvement in needlework and charity. She survives frequent insults and acquiesces to the rule that forbids her from touching a bridal veil. Although she balances her needs with a sensible outlook and minor pleasures, it is harder to tolerate children who revile Pearl. To Mistress Hibbins, Hester admits that losing the child would shove her over the line to Satan's followers.

Outside the tight circle of Hester, Pearl, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth, the Puritans seem the least capable of forgiveness. At the foot of the scaffold, harsh-faced matrons criticize magistrates for imposing a lenient sentence on Hester. When Hester returns to her cottage after years in Europe, she reenters the Puritan wasteland and becomes a missionary of forgiveness among troubled women who yearn for a word of kindness and hope. In her role as fallen woman turned to good works, she distributes forgiveness one by one, tending to damaged hearts and psyches.)

Questions 9 and 10 (Critical Level)

9. Why does Dimmesdale condemn Chillingworth as the greater sinner?

(When the young minister learns the truth about Chillingworth, he condemns the old leech as the most heinous sinner among them. He declares that the "old man's revenge has been blacker than my sin. He has violated, in cold blood, the sanctity of a human heart. Thou and I, Hester, never did so!" Dimmesdale does not deny his own sin, but he recognizes that the sin of adultery grew out of illicit love. The leech, in contrast, calculatedly destroys the soul of another human being, drawing motivation and strength from hatred.)

10. Which character endures the greatest suffering?

(The victims of this story are manifold. Hester bears loneliness during her pregnancy and jail term, tolerates seven years of public scorn, and worries that her child may be marked by the parents' fall from grace. Pearl, the most innocent sufferer, endures ostracism for no fault of her own and lives apart from Boston with only her mother and her fantasies for company. As a pair, they survive together as comrades in suffering and reminders to each other of their mutual part in public scandal. Dimmesdale, whom some consider the hero of the story, lives apart from his lover and daughter and builds a successful career as a minister. The paradox of his holy words and degraded deeds build an intolerable stress in his mind, which Chillingworth exacerbates. As Hester and Pearl thrive in their limited home, he walks among the powerful, accepts their adoration of his ministry, and weakens to the point of collapse.

Chillingworth, the wronged husband, has his own torment to survive. He lives two years as a captive of Indians, then returns to Boston to find his young, beautiful wife standing at the pillory with an obviously base-born infant in her arms. At the same time that he extends them treatment for their anguish, he builds his own hell inside by seeking vengeance against the father. A clever man, the leech quickly deduces which man fathered Pearl and succeeds in torturing him to the brink of death. As Dimmesdale slips away on the scaffold, Chillingworth realizes that he has made sadism the goal of his life. Just as Dimmesdale finds no peace in success, so does Chillingworth succeed too well

and destroy his victim. Left victimless, Chillingworth also dies, leaving Hester and Pearl to continue making happiness out of what life offers them.)

Questions 11-13 (Creative Level)

11. Make a map of colonial towns and locate places where Puritans flourished and contributed to American history.
12. Make an oral report on zealots. Account for the delight of Puritans in tormenting a fallen woman and her child.
13. Sketch a stage setting for crucial scenes in the novel. Include the forest meeting, Pearl playing along the beach, the procession to the meeting house, the leech's examination of the infant at the jail, and Dimmesdale's death on the scaffold.

Across the Curriculum

Art

1. Using desk-top publishing or other artistic media, design a placard announcing the arrival of a new physician in Boston or the death of Governor Winthrop, a diploma for a graduate of Bowdoin College, a marriage certificate for Hester and Roger, instructions for embroidering gloves or sewing a shroud, a list of dignitaries in the procession, a public announcement about Hester's crime, advertisement of passage from the Spanish Main or to Bristol, a map showing the distance from Boston to Salem or from Amsterdam to Massachusetts Bay Colony, and a schematic drawing of a cemetery with locations of Dimmesdale's and Hester Prynne's graves or of a pillory and scaffold, and several styles of letters to adorn an adulterer or a slate tombstone.
2. Compose a movie billboard for *The Scarlet Letter* featuring a brookside scene, Hester's visit to Governor Winthrop, Pearl designing a seaweed hat, Mistress Hibbins coaxing fellow witches to the forest, Governor Bellingham interviewing Pearl, Dimmesdale whipping himself in private, a young woman sympathizing with Hester on the scaffold, the captain giving Pearl a chain, and Chillingworth living with the Indians.

3. Dress dolls in appropriate Puritan costume, featuring somber colors, pointed hats and caps covering hair, white collars and cuffs, gauntlets, aprons, and shoes with buckles.

Cinema

1. Summarize orally the roles of Robert Duvall, Gary Oldman, and Demi Moore in the 1995 film version of *The Scarlet Letter*. Comment on the supporting roles for Mistress Hibbins, Indians, and others that differ from the original text.
2. Discuss the theme of community instability in these videos and films: *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Ghosts of Mississippi*, *The Crucible*, *The Ox-Bow Incident*, *Mutiny on the Bounty*, *Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here*, *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*, *Mississippi Burning*, *Cheyenne Autumn*, *The Power of One*, and *Three Sovereigns for Sarah*. Discuss with a small group the causes and results of mob violence.
3. Sketch a story board of events in Pearl's life. Include her birth, meeting with her father, inheritance from Roger Chillingworth, passage to England, wedding, and motherhood.

Economics

1. Explain to a small group the poverty that keeps Hester in servitude to fashionable ladies. Comment on the need for embroidered garments as well as baby clothes and shrouds.
2. Summarize the lack of supervisory roles for women in Puritan New England, either in government, church, or home. List jobs available to females, such as barmaid, innkeeper, seamstress, cook, and nurse.

Education

1. Brainstorm a curriculum to help Pearl and other youth of Boston learn forbearance, tolerance, and humanism, for example, games and activities that develop trust and mutual dependence. Suggest readings from the period to supplant or supplement dreary religious essays and moralistic sermons, especially ballads, plays, masques, sonnets, counting and alphabet rhymes, and narrative poetry.

Geography

1. Create a mural or web site that contrasts these settings: jail cell, meeting house, Dimmesdale’s closet, the window overlooking the cemetery, Hester’s house, the peninsula, streets, Hester’s grave, the scaffold, Governor Bellingham’s house, the balcony, and the brook in the forest.
2. Note the location of native tribes of the period and the site of the Pequot War. Explain why European expeditions decimated Indians by spreading disease.
3. Compose a paragraph expressing Hawthorne’s connection of deep woods with Indians, evil, freedom, gloom, and communion with Satan. Explain why there are no negative attachments to the scene at the beach until Pearl fashions an A out of eelgrass.

History and Social Studies

1. Write a brief address explaining the Puritan’s perception of adultery as a civil crime.
2. Make contrasting chalkboard definitions of theocracy and democracy.
3. Lead a debate about punishment that lasts a lifetime. Comment on Hester’s acquiescence to wearing the letter even after her return from Europe.
4. Contrast the fictional sufferings of Hester Prynne with the biography of Anne Hutchinson, who was banished for leading a women’s Bible study group.
5. Re-create by time line, webbing, flow chart, mural, or web site the milieu of seventeenth-century Massachusetts. Itemize why this era was a turning point in the settlement of the New World and in the establishment of justice for the colonies. Comment on the political climate in England and the reason that Puritans chose to resettle in New England.
6. Explain why feminists declare witchhunts, banishment, and pillorying as prime example of misogyny, i. e., the castigation and torment of women, especially the young, husbandless, vulnerable, poor, and powerless.

Language and Speech

1. Compose individual posters explaining these terms: bayonet, besom, catarrh, chirography, cuirass, fiend, gauntlet, gleeman, gorget, greave, joint-stool, lattice, partridgeberry, primer, ruff, scourge, scurvy, ship-chandler, slop-seller, steeple-crowned hat, stucco, suit of mail, and tarpaulin.
2. Account for Hawthorne’s choice of Arthur, Hester, and Pearl for names. Note that Hester derives from the Latin for “star.” Comment on the implications of a “dim dale” and “chilling worth.”
3. Generate a glossary of legal, biblical, and canonical terms from the novel.

Literature

1. Read aloud from sermons and tracts of the period, particularly Jonathan Edwards’ “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”
2. Citing examples from *The Scarlet Letter*, account for the tone, style, and aim of the author’s prefatory remarks. Express Boston’s dismay after the publication of “The Custom House.”
3. Draw a character web representing the social and economic interconnectedness between the governor, his sister, ministers, congregations, Indians, sailors, newcomers, and convicted criminals.

Mathematics and Computers

1. Using desktop publishing, compose an annotated time line of periods in which Puritanism dominated parts of Europe and the United States. Include a series of current events that indicate the attempts of pious people to govern the consciences of others.
2. Estimate the population of Boston and the Massachusetts Bay Colony in Hester’s day and in 1850, when *The Scarlet Letter* was published.

Music

1. Work with a group to compose musical themes, psalms, anthems, marching songs, and lullabies to accompany graphic scenes from the play, such as Hester lulling the crying infant, Dimmesdale marching to the Election Day sermon, songs sung in the meeting house, Pearl chasing her shadow, and background music for Chillingworth’s arrival at Dimmesdale’s residence.

Religion

1. Chart the major beliefs of Puritans. Discuss elements of Boston society that conflict with strict Puritanism, particularly the rowdy crowd that gathers for the procession on Election Day, local Indians, and sailors who move freely from port to port.
2. Express in a paragraph the change in Dimmesdale's idealism after seven years of suffering in private. Note how he values truth and seeks forgiveness for fathering a child, ignoring the mother's sufferings, and denying the child's existence.
3. Discuss the sexual and moral implications of adultery that cause the greatest affront to Puritan society and the church fathers.
4. Compose a short speech in which you describe how religious fanaticism demoralizes victims, oppresses the weak, and encourages hypocrisy and persecution of the innocent.
5. Locate lines that connect Hester and Dimmesdale to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Comment on the implications of eelgrass, which parallels the serpent that tempted Eve.
6. Characterize in separate paragraphs the different levels of sin committed by Dimmesdale, Hester, Pearl, and Chillingworth. Include the differences in public awareness of each person's culpability.

Science and Health

1. Compose a lecture on the decline in Hester and Pearl's health in the Boston jail. Make a chalkboard list of inadequacies, particularly space, light, heat, bathing facilities, clean clothing, exercise, visiting rights, and food.
2. Explain why the sentence of public pillorying endangers an innocent child.
3. Make an astronomical chart accounting for the scarlet A that appears in the sky. Note other heavenly bodies that vary from stark white to pastels, orange, and red.

Student Involvement Activities

1. Organize a panel discussion of the long-range effects of religious oppression on both victims and oppressors. Why is it important for people of different faiths and beliefs to shop, work, go to school, live, worship, discuss, and play together?
2. List questions to ask at an interview with Boston's citizens and religious leaders. Determine how their outlook and feelings changed after Hester became a model citizen and saint to the poor and suffering. Ask their attitude toward the affliction of Pearl and threats to remove her from Hester's care.
3. Using desktop publishing, compose an introduction and synopsis of the novels and stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne, particularly *The Scarlet Letter*, *The House of the Seven Gables*, "Young Goodman Brown," "The Birthmark," "Rappacini's Daughter," and "My Kinsman, Major Molyneux."
4. Explain in a short speech the rights to discuss individual opinions, to dissent, and to worship without harassment or intervention. Include commentary on Miranda Rights, which allow a suspect to remain silent until represented by an attorney. Why is the concept of *habeas corpus* a major benefit to democracy? How did this concept evolve from the *Magna Carta* to influence modern democracies?
5. Dramatize in a short skit an ecclesiastical inquiry. Contrast a humble female plaintiff and scorners with pompous judges, the beadle and jailer, and the self-important governor. Express the position of the young wife toward Hester's sentence.
6. Create a list of images from the novel that appeal to the five senses, such as "In all those years it had never once been opened; but either she unlocked it, or the decaying wood and iron yielded to her hand, or she glided shadowlike through these impediments—and, at all events, went in."

7. Write a scene in which Dimmesdale encounters Hester upon her arrival at the pier after disembarking the ship from Amsterdam.
8. Discuss the effects of rumors of witches and Satan worship, threats, despair, intimidation, fanaticism, public punishment, and scorn on Hester, Pearl, Dimmesdale, and the people of Boston. Explain why negative public policy harms all citizens.
9. Draw a cause-and-effect diagram illustrating the change that occurs in Dimmesdale after his meeting with Hester and Pearl by the brook.

Alternate Assessment

1. Cite examples of rumor, fear, insecurity, intimidation, parenthood, coercion, strategy, lies, and confession as they apply to Hester and her lover.
2. List actions that demonstrate a lack of charity and forgiveness in Puritan Boston.
3. Compose a scene in which Hester narrates her life story to the next governor.
4. Compile a character list and explain the relationship of each to Pearl. Include Dimmesdale, Hester, Chillingworth, Bellingham, Wilson, the beadle, Brackett, and local children.

Teacher's Notes

Vocabulary

Select synonyms of the underlined words from the list below to fill the blanks in the passage. You will have answers left over when you finish.

abuse	buckler	gleeman	mimicked	professors
apparel	commencing	grimly	minstrel	repressed
appliances	countenanced	industry	mirthful	sentiment
ballad	discipline	jests	modes	severe
beadle	emigrants	jocularity	ochre	transgressed
bout	essential	manliness	orb	vitality
buccaneer	garb	merriment	ply	witnessed

The people were (1) allowed _____, if not encouraged, in relaxing the (2) harsh _____ and close application to their various (3) ways _____ of rugged (4) work _____, which, at all other times, seemed of the same piece and material with their religion. Here, it is true, were none of the (5) equipment _____ which popular (6) fun _____ would so readily have found in the England of Elizabeth's time, or that of James—no rude shows of a theatrical kind; no (7) performer _____, with his harp and legendary (8) song _____, nor (9) singer _____, with an ape dancing to his music; no juggler, with his tricks of (10) pretended _____ witchcraft, no Merry Andrew, to stir up the multitude with (11) jokes _____, perhaps hundreds of years old, but still effective, by their appeals to the very broadest sources of (12) humorous _____ sympathy. All such (13) proponents _____ of the several branches of (14) gaiety _____ would have been sternly (15) supressed _____, not only by the rigid (16) rule _____ of law, but by the general (17) attitude _____ which gives law its (18) strength _____. Not the less, however, the great, honest face of the people smiled, (19) severely _____, perhaps, but widely too. Nor were sports wanting, such as the colonists had (20) observed _____ and shared in long ago, at the country fairs and on the village greens of England; and which it was thought well to keep alive on this new soil, for the sake of the courage and (21) brawn _____ that were (22) necessary _____ in them. Wrestling matches, in the different fashions of Cornwall and Devonshire, were seen here and there about the market place, in one corner, there was a friendly (23) competition _____ at quarterstaff; and—what attracted most interest of all—on the platform of the pillory, already so noted in our pages, two masters of defence were (24) beginning _____ an exhibition with the (25) shield _____ and broadsword.

Comprehension Test A

Part I: Multiple Choice (20 points)

Complete each of the following descriptions with a response from the list that follows. Place the letter of your answer in the blank provided at left.

- _____ 1. Hawthorne demonstrates his anguish over
- his Puritan ancestors' narrow-minded obsessions.
 - the treatment of single women in colonial Boston.
 - children who grow up fatherless and guilty.
 - all of the above.
- _____ 2. Hawthorne loses his job as customs surveyor because he is
- bored.
 - careless with weights and measures.
 - the wrong political party.
 - more interested in writing.
- _____ 3. Hester's daughter is
- the offspring of marriage to an older husband.
 - learning needlework rather than catechism.
 - vengeful toward cruel children.
 - all of the above.
- _____ 4. The Reverend Dimmesdale is
- incapable of loving his mate and daughter.
 - Hester's accuser in the marketplace.
 - dying of heart disease.
 - successful at preaching an Election Day sermon.
- _____ 5. Bostonians think Hester is
- an unmarried Englishwoman.
 - the source of a strange red light in the sky.
 - leaving on a ship bound for Bristol.
 - an adulterer and mother of an illegitimate daughter.
- _____ 6. Governor Bellingham decides whether
- Hester is a reliable seamstress.
 - Pearl should remain with her mother.
 - Dimmesdale is strong enough to deliver an Election Day sermon.
 - Chillingworth should be admitted to Hester's jail cell.

- _____ 7. Hester's lover refuses to stand
- in the meeting house on Election Day.
 - on the balcony with Reverend Wilson.
 - on the scaffold with his lover and daughter.
 - all of the above.
- _____ 8. The deformed man in the crowd
- determines to identify Hester's lover.
 - escapes from an Indian village.
 - books passage for four on the ship bound for Bristol.
 - sends a message to the captain that he will attend the minister during the voyage.
- _____ 9. Hester's lover
- encounters her at the brook in the forest.
 - tries to establish a relationship with his daughter.
 - draws strength from her.
 - all of the above.
- _____ 10. After Pearl marries, Hester
- lives in Amsterdam.
 - returns to her cottage and aids troubled women.
 - dies in England and is buried alongside her parents.
 - inherits her husband's estate.

Part II: True or False (20 points)

Mark the following statements either T for true or F if any part is false.

- _____ 1. Chillingworth dies unrepentant.
- _____ 2. Pearl inherits her father's wealth.
- _____ 3. Matrons observing Hester on the scaffold think the punishment is too lenient.
- _____ 4. Pearl inherits evil from her parents and torments other children.
- _____ 5. Chillingworth quietly deduces the identity of Pearl's father.
- _____ 6. Hester's cottage lies deep in the forest near an Indian village.
- _____ 7. Hester deliberately awaits Dimmesdale's return to speak with him in private.
- _____ 8. Blaming himself for their loveless marriage, Hester's husband forgives his wife.
- _____ 9. Boston's magistrates show mercy to Hester by not marking the child as well as the mother.
- _____ 10. Hester's pastor hints to his congregation that he is sinful.

Comprehension Test A (Page 2)

Part III: Matching (30 points)

Match the following lines with names or places from the list below. Place the letter of your response in the blank provided at left.

- | | |
|---|---------------------|
| _____ 1. is the location of Puritan colonists in the New World | A. Pearl |
| _____ 2. comforts Governor Winthrop and advises young women | B. Mistress Hibbins |
| _____ 3. is brother to a witch | C. Master Brackett |
| _____ 4. is the only place the minister could escape his torturer | D. forest |
| _____ 5. washes off a kiss | E. Wilson |
| _____ 6. stands by the leech as Hester is punished at the pillory | F. an Indian |
| _____ 7. intercedes for Hester from the balcony | G. Chillingworth |
| _____ 8. makes Hester keep a cruel promise | H. John Eliot |
| _____ 9. offers to accompany Hester to the forest | I. Hester |
| _____ 10. harbors an antique parchment | J. governor |
| _____ 11. gives Pearl a gold chain | K. Custom House |
| _____ 12. brings Chillingworth to the jail | L. New England |
| _____ 13. questions Pearl about catechism | M. scaffold |
| _____ 14. place where the Black Man lives | N. Dimmesdale |
| _____ 15. missionary to the Indians | O. captain |

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Explain how light and dark enhance the forest meeting.
2. Describe the private suffering of Dimmesdale.
3. Explain how the young minister impresses his congregation.
4. Account for Hester's failed marriage.
5. Discuss the symbolism of the hand over the heart.

Comprehension Test B

Part I: True or False (30 points)

Mark the following statements either T for true or F if any part is false. Rewrite any false statements to make them true.

- ___ 1. The Custom House adds no useful information about the story of Hester.
- ___ 2. Hawthorne satirizes Custom House employees.
- ___ 3. The author enjoyed working as a customs inspector.
- ___ 4. Seventeenth-century Boston is a town in the Massachusetts Bay Colony.
- ___ 5. Hester is a young married woman who has borne a child from an adulterous relationship.
- ___ 6. When Reverend Wilson questions her, Hester refuses to name her child's father.
- ___ 7. Hester's husband demands the scarlet letter as a penalty for his fallen wife.
- ___ 8. Neighbors sympathize with Hester as she lives in her lonely beach cottage and rears a child.
- ___ 9. Chillingworth deliberately lives in an Indian village for two years after arriving from Europe.
- ___ 10. The physician pities Hester and offers his advice and support while she is in jail.
- ___ 11. Chillingworth was an old scholar when he married the young Englishwoman.
- ___ 12. From the balcony, Dimmesdale condemns Hester for not naming her lover.
- ___ 13. From whipping himself in his closet, the young minister develops a fatal mark on his chest.
- ___ 14. Hester promises the physician that she will conceal his identity.
- ___ 15. Pearl seems unaware of her mother's punishment for sin.

Part II: Short Answer (20 points)

Supply a word or phrase in answer to each of the following questions. Place your response in the blank provided at left.

- _____ 1. In what year was *The Scarlet Letter* published?
- _____ 2. Where does Hawthorne gather material for a story?
- _____ 3. How long must Hester wear the letter?
- _____ 4. Whom does the leech attend at the jail?
- _____ 5. What does the young minister use as a punishment tool?
- _____ 6. What adorns the slate monument?
- _____ 7. When does Dimmesdale march in the procession?
- _____ 8. What question does Pearl answer for the men at the Governor's hall?
- _____ 9. What does the captain give Pearl?
- _____ 10. What three meanings does the "A" represent?

Comprehension Test B (Page 2)

Part III: Fill-in (20 points)

Supply words or phrases to complete each of the following statements.

1. _____ refuses to cross the brook until _____ picks up the letter.
2. After the meeting in the _____, _____ considers shocking his parishioners.
3. After leaving the _____, the captain stops at the port of Boston on his way to _____.
4. _____ advises troubled _____ of Boston.
5. _____ fears that the medicine will poison _____.

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Compare the motives of Wilson, Dimmesdale, and Bellingham in advising Hester.
2. Describe events that force Hester to conceal her husband's identity.
3. Discuss the symbolism of the gold chain that Pearl playfully winds around her.
4. Outline the relationship between Hester and her accusers.
5. Explain the symbolism of the wild rose blooming by the jail.

Answer Key

VOCABULARY

- | | |
|-----------------|----------------|
| 1. countenanced | 14. jocularly |
| 2. severe | 15. repressed |
| 3. modes | 16. discipline |
| 4. industry | 17. sentiment |
| 5. appliances | 18. vitality |
| 6. merriment | 19. grimly |
| 7. minstrel | 20. witnessed |
| 8. ballad | 21. manliness |
| 9. gleeman | 22. essential |
| 10. mimicked | 23. bout |
| 11. jests | 24. commencing |
| 12. mirthful | 25. buckler |
| 13. professors | |

COMPREHENSION TEST A

Part I: Multiple Choice (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. A | 6. B |
| 2. C | 7. C |
| 3. C | 8. A |
| 4. D | 9. D |
| 5. D | 10. B |

Part II: True or False (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. T | 6. F |
| 2. T | 7. T |
| 3. T | 8. F |
| 4. F | 9. F |
| 5. T | 10. T |

Part III: Matching (20 points)

- | | | |
|------|-------|-------|
| 1. L | 6. F | 11. O |
| 2. I | 7. N | 12. C |
| 3. J | 8. G | 13. E |
| 4. M | 9. B | 14. D |
| 5. A | 10. K | 15. H |

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answers will vary.

COMPREHENSION TEST B

Part I: True or False (30 points)

- | | | |
|------|-------|-------|
| 1. T | 6. T | 11. T |
| 2. T | 7. F | 12. F |
| 3. F | 8. F | 13. T |
| 4. T | 9. F | 14. T |
| 5. T | 10. F | 15. F |

Part II: Short Answer (20 points)

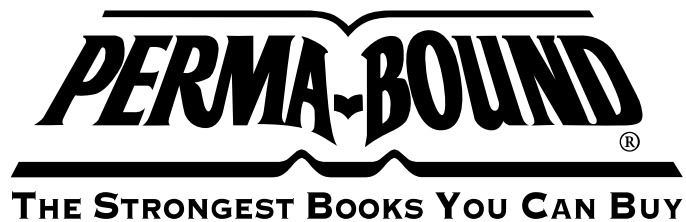
- | | |
|---------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. 1850 | 6. the letter A |
| 2. Custom House | 7. Election Day |
| 3. all her life | 8. Who made thee? |
| 4. Hester and Pearl | 9. gold chain |
| 5. whip | 10. adultery, angel, able |

Part III: Fill-in (20 points)

- Pearl, Hester
- forest, Dimmesdale
- Spanish Main, Bristol
- Hester, women
- Hester, Pearl

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answers will vary.



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