

*The Scarlet Letter* (1850)

- Author: **Nathaniel Hawthorne** (1804-1864)
- Setting: **Colonial New England, Puritan village of Boston, Massachusetts, 1642-1649**
- Year Published: **1850 (Romantic Period)**
- Unlike novels that deal with realistic representations of human experiences or external truths, *The Scarlet Letter* is a romantic novel that
  - explores **internal** truths or “truths of the human heart.”
  - deviates from reality in favor of **imagination**.
  - embellishes the relationship between humans and **nature**.
  - Thus, *The Scarlet Letter* is not an historical novel about Puritan Boston, but
    - a romantic novel set about 200 years before Hawthorne's time.
    - a novel that tells a tale that may have occurred, given some historical facts and many insights into human nature.

**IMPORTANT TERMS 5**

|           |          |                          |             |
|-----------|----------|--------------------------|-------------|
| Allegory  | Setting  | <i>Dramatic Irony</i>    | Climax      |
| Motif     | Plot     | <i>Situational Irony</i> | Tone        |
| Metaphor  | Mood     | <i>Verbal Irony</i>      | Theme       |
| Imagery   | Allusion | Foreshadowing            | Protagonist |
| Symbolism | Irony    | Characterization         | Antagonist  |

You should be ready to apply each theme, symbol, and motif to the novel. Keep a record of how each theme develops, what each symbol stands for, and which motifs occur and what they mean. Put page numbers and other information in the boxes or on your own paper. Blanks boxes are left to add your own or add something I decide on later.

**Themes**

|                        |                          |        |                          |                                   |        |
|------------------------|--------------------------|--------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------|
| religion/theocracy     | sin                      | guilt  | breaking society's rules | alienation                        | gossip |
| appearance vs. reality | free will vs. obligation | gender | love vs. lust            | the importance of narrative voice |        |
|                        |                          |        |                          |                                   |        |

To write a theme, write a sentence in your own words that applies each topic to the novel and shows how the novel imparts a message concerning it. Do the same for the motifs. Upon completion of the novel, you should be able to do this for each theme and motif.

- **Example (Theme: Guilt)** The spiritual, mental, and physical manifestations of guilt present themselves in powerful ways, showing that guilt is a powerful emotion that causes various truths to be exposed.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Period \_\_\_\_\_

### Symbols

|            |                      |                      |               |                              |            |
|------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------|------------------------------|------------|
| the prison | grass plot           | rose-bush            | the letter A  | the scaffold                 | night      |
| the sun    | the forest           | the brook            | the color red | golden embroidery on the "A" | the meteor |
| Pearl      | the minor characters | the major characters |               |                              |            |
|            |                      |                      |               |                              |            |

### Motifs

|                                 |                    |               |  |  |  |
|---------------------------------|--------------------|---------------|--|--|--|
| civilization vs. the wilderness | light/dark/shadows | old and young |  |  |  |
|                                 |                    |               |  |  |  |
|                                 |                    |               |  |  |  |
|                                 |                    |               |  |  |  |

**Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864)**

Along with Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne is sometimes referred to as an Anti-Transcendentalist. Although he lived at a time when many intellectuals glorified the power of the human spirit, as it was described by Transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Hawthorne found it impossible to adopt such an optimistic worldview. Despite his admiration for Emerson, Hawthorne believed that evil was a dominant force in the world, and his fiction expresses a gloomy vision of human affairs.

Born as Nathaniel Hathorne, Jr. on July 4, 1804 in Salem, Massachusetts, Hawthorne was descended from a prominent Puritan family. William Hathorne, an ancestor of Hawthorne's who came to Massachusetts in 1630, was a Puritan judge who is known for persecuting the Quakers. In "The Custom House," Hawthorne says that his ancestor "had inherited all the Puritanic traits, both good and evil." William Hathorne's son, John, "inherited the persecuting spirit," and played a key role in the persecution of women in the Salem witchcraft trials. Both Hawthorne's character and his focus as a writer were shaped by a sense of inherited guilt. He was haunted by the intolerance and cruelty of these ancestors, even though he himself was not a Puritan and was born 112 years after the Salem witchcraft trials. After 1830, Hawthorne changed the spelling of his surname to include a *w*.

After graduation from Maine's Bowdoin College in 1825, Hawthorne secluded himself at his mother's house in Salem and wrote a novel, *Fanshawe*. Soon after the book's anonymous publication in 1828, the young author was seized by shame and abruptly burned most available copies of it. During the nine years that followed, Hawthorne single-mindedly honed his writing skills, working in a room he called the dismal chamber on the third floor of his mother's house. These labors resulted in a collection of stories entitled *Twice-Told Tales*, which was published in 1837. Although the book sold poorly, it established Hawthorne as a respected writer and gave him sufficient resources and encouragement to continue his writing.

After moving out of his mother's house, Hawthorne lived briefly at Brook Farm, the utopian community designed by the Transcendentalists. Then, in 1842, he married Sophia Peabody and moved to the Old Manse at Concord, Massachusetts, where Emerson had once lived. During his years in Concord, Hawthorne spent time with both Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, but their vastly different spiritual philosophies remained an obstacle to deeper friendship. While in Concord, Hawthorne published a second collection of stories, *Mosses From an Old Manse* (1846), and celebrated the birth of his first daughter, Una.

In 1846, as a result of financial difficulties, Hawthorne moved back home to work at the Salem Custom House<sup>1</sup>. In 1849, a change in administration forced him out of office and left him bitter. In 1850, he published his masterpiece, *The Scarlet Letter*, a powerful novel about sin and guilt among early Puritans. The book was extremely successful, earning him fame.

Following the publication of *The Scarlet Letter*, the Hawthornes moved to Lenox, Massachusetts, in part to escape from the controversy surrounding the satirical "Custom-House" sketch, which angered many in Salem. During a year and a half in Lenox, Hawthorne developed a complicated friendship with Herman Melville, who championed Hawthorne as a great American writer in his 1850 "Hawthorne and His Mosses" and dedicated *Moby-Dick* to him. Hawthorne, over time, pulled back from the man, and their paths seldom crossed after 1852, when the Hawthornes moved to West Newton and then back to Concord. Hawthorne was especially productive during the early 1850s, publishing *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), set in contemporary Salem, and *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), which drew on Hawthorne's own experiences at Brook Farm.

When his college friend Franklin Pierce became president, Hawthorne was named the American consul at Liverpool, England. He spent several years in England and traveled through Italy before returning to Massachusetts. He used his Italian experiences in the novel *The Marble Faun* (1860). Hawthorne died in his sleep four years later, while on a carriage tour in New Hampshire. He left four unfinished novels among his belongings.

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<sup>1</sup> a building housing the offices for the government officials who processed the paperwork for the import and export of goods into and out of a country. Customs officials also collected customs duty on imported goods. The Customs House was typically located in a seaport or in a city on a major river with access to the ocean.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Period \_\_\_\_\_

## *The Scarlet Letter*

## Quotations

For each quotation, give the **speaker**, **to or about whom the speaker is talking**, the **meaning** (including the **situation**), and the **significance**.

1. "Be not silent from any mistaken pity and tenderness for him; for, believe me, Hester, though he were to step down from a high place, and stand there beside thee, on thy pedestal of shame, yet better were it so, than to hide a guilty heart through life." Chapter 3

2. "I have thought of death—have wished for it—would even have prayed for it, were it fit that such as I should pray for anything." Chapter 4

3. "thou knowest that I was frank with thee. I felt no love, nor feigned any." Chapter 4

4. "We have wronged each other . . . Mine was the first wrong, when I betrayed thy budding youth into a false and unnatural relation with my decay." Chapter 4

5. "She is my happiness!—she is my torture, none the less." Chapter 8

6. "Speak for me! Thou knowest,—for thou hast sympathies which these men lack!" Chapter 8

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Period \_\_\_\_\_

## *The Scarlet Letter*

## Quotations

7. "I found them growing on a grave, which bore no tombstone, no other memorial of the dead man, save these ugly weeds that have taken upon themselves to keep him in remembrance. They grew out of his heart, and typify, it may be, some hideous secret that was buried with him, and which he had done better to confess during his lifetime." Chapter 10

8. "Ye have both been here before, but I was not with you." Chapter 12

9. "I hate him, Hester! . . . I tell thee, my soul shivers at him. Who is he?" Chapter 12

10. "Your clutch is on his life, and you cause him to die daily a living death; and still he knows you not." Chapter 14

11. "Once in my life I met the Black Man! This scarlet letter is his mark!" Chapter 16

12. "Happy are you, Hester, that wear the scarlet letter openly upon your bosom! Mine burns in secret! Thou little knowest what a relief it is, after the torment of a seven years' cheat, to look into an eye that recognizes me for what I am!" Chapter 17

13. "We are not, Hester, the worst sinners in the world. There is one worse than even the polluted priest! That old man's revenge has been blacker than my sin." Chapter 17

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Period \_\_\_\_\_

## *The Scarlet Letter*

## Quotations

14. "They say, child, thou art of the lineage of the Prince of the Air!" Chapter 22

15. "Do not blacken your fame, and perish in dishonor! I can yet save you!" Chapter 23

16. "Hadst thou sought the whole earth over, there was no one place so secret,—no high place nor lowly place, where thou couldst have escaped me,—save on this very scaffold!" Chapter 23

17. "People of New England! . . . behold me here, the one sinner of the world! At last—at last!—I stand upon the spot where, seven years since, I should have stood." Chapter 23

18. ". . . when we forgot our God,—when we violated our reverence each for the other's soul,—it was thenceforth vain to hope that we could meet hereafter, in an everlasting and pure reunion." Chapter 23

19. "Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!" Chapter 24

*The Scarlet Letter* Reading Guide, Chapters 1-12*Chapter One: The Prison-Door*

1. What is the significance of Hawthorne's use of the phrase "virgin soil"?
2. According to the narrator, what were the first two things built by the founders of the colony?
3. Explain the agricultural symbolism in this chapter.

*Chapter Two: The Market-Place*

1. What is the narrator's take on Puritan religion?
2. Describe the women gathered at the prison. Do they agree with Hester's sentence? Explain.
3. What is her crime?
4. What kind of woman is Hester Prynne? List details from the text.
5. Describe the scarlet letter.
6. Describe Hester's journey to the marketplace. Does it remind you of anything?
7. To what biblical story does the narrator allude at the marketplace?
8. How does Hester cope with the staring?

*Chapter Three: The Recognition*

1. What simile does the narrator use in the description of the stranger's face? Why is it significant?
2. What background information do we learn from the stranger's conversation with a townsman in the crowd?
3. Why do the magistrates give Hester a "lesser" punishment than expected?
4. Describe Governor Bellingham.
5. Who is John Wilson? What is his opinion on Hester's case?
6. Who is Mr. Dimmesdale, and what is his role in the matter?
7. Explain how Dimmesdale has opposing character traits.
8. Why won't Hester reveal her lover's name?
9. How does Wilson respond to her silence?

*Chapter Four: The Interview*

1. Why does Hester need a doctor?
2. What kind of training has the doctor undergone?
3. What does the jailer suspect the trouble to be?
4. Who is Roger Chillingworth?
5. According to Chillingworth, what is the best vengeance?
6. How does he explain or justify Hester's sin?
7. Why does Chillingworth feel so confident in his quest?
8. Explain how he is a paradox to Hester.
9. What favor does Chillingworth ask of Hester?
10. To whom does Hester compare Chillingworth?

*Chapter Five: Hester at Her Needle*

1. Why are Hester's first steps out of prison worse than her public shaming at the novel's opening?
2. In what way does Hester become a symbol?
3. What are Hester's other options, and why does she dismiss them?
4. Describe Hester's house. What is significant?
5. How does she make a living? Why is this significant? Is she successful?
6. How does Hester dress? How does she dress her child?
7. Does Hester "fit in"? Why or why not?
8. Explain how the scarlet letter gives Hester insight.
9. According to the narrator, what is "one of the saddest results of sin"?
10. What legend develops around the scarlet letter? What is the effect on Hester?

*Chapter Six: Pearl*

1. Explain the origin of Pearl's name.
2. Describe Hester's attitude toward her daughter.
3. Describe Pearl's demeanor or behavior. How does the narrator explain Pearl's conduct?
4. What are some of Hester's fears surrounding Pearl?
5. Based on this chapter, how might you characterize young Puritans?
6. How does Pearl occupy her time?

7. Describe Pearl's fascination with the scarlet letter and its effect on Hester.
8. Why is Hester in a "labyrinth of doubt"?

*Chapter Seven: The Governor's Hall*

1. Why does Hester visit Governor Bellingham?
2. Summarize the narrator's comments on the colonial legal system (second paragraph).
3. Describe the portraits on the governor's wall. What mood do they create?
4. What effect does the armor have on Hester's appearance?
5. What happens in the garden? Why is this significant?

*Chapter Eight: The Elf-Child and the Minister*

1. What is the effect of the narrator's allusion to John the Baptist?
2. How does Mr. Wilson characterize Pearl?
3. Describe Pearl's education.
4. How does she respond to Mr. Wilson's question?
5. How does Hester characterize Pearl?
6. How does Dimmesdale defend Hester? Why?
7. What is the result of Dimmesdale's pleading?
8. Describe Pearl's interaction with Dimmesdale.
9. What does Chillingworth propose? How does Reverend Wilson react?
10. What sort of invitation does Mistress Hibbins extend to Hester? How does she respond, and why is this significant?

*Chapter Nine: The Leech*

1. What is significant about Chillingworth's name?
2. What is his secret?
3. According to the narrator, why does the colony lack good doctors?
4. How do Dimmesdale's friends account for his failing health? Explain the irony in their reaction to his illness.
5. Describe the debate between Dimmesdale and Chillingworth.
6. Explain how Dimmesdale's "illness" relates to his heart *and* mind.
7. Why do the men move in together?
8. What rumor circulates about Chillingworth's healing powers?
9. Why do you think this chapter is called "The Leech"?

*Chapter Ten: The Leech and His Patient*

1. Describe the relationship between Dimmesdale and Chillingworth. What does the narrator imply?
2. Explain the significance of Chillingworth's herbs. What is his view of nature?
3. What is Pearl's take on the relationship between the two men?
4. What is Chillingworth's diagnosis of Dimmesdale? What does he prescribe?
5. What happens while Dimmesdale is sleeping?

*Chapter Eleven: The Interior of a Heart*

1. What is Chillingworth's plan for "intimate revenge"?
2. What does the narrator reveal about the "interior" of Dimmesdale's heart?
3. Describe Dimmesdale's spiritual practices. What Puritan tenets are most important to him?
4. Explain the significance of Dimmesdale's "visions."

*Chapter Twelve: The Minister's Vigil*

1. Why does Dimmesdale go to the scaffold at night?
2. Who are his potential witnesses? Why might this be significant?
3. Describe his encounter with Reverend Wilson.
4. What happens on the scaffold? Explain the symbolism.
5. What does the narrator reveal about early America's relationship with the stars?
6. What does Dimmesdale see among the stars, and how does the narrator judge him for it?
7. Who witnesses the trio on the scaffold?
8. Why won't Pearl tell Reverend Dimmesdale what she knows?
9. What happens at church the following day?
10. How is the glove symbolic?



*The Scarlet Letter* Reading Guide, Chapters 13-24

*Chapter Thirteen: Another View of Hester*

1. Why does Hester Prynne feel obligated to help Reverend Dimmesdale?
2. What has happened to her reputation after seven years? How has the scarlet letter's symbolism changed?
3. Why do the rulers of the community take longer to recognize the change in Hester?
4. How has Hester changed for the worse?
5. How does the narrator account for Hester's change?
6. Describe the difference between Europe and America at this time.
7. Summarize the narrator's "what if" predictions regarding Hester.
8. Why does the narrator say, "The scarlet letter had not done its office"?
9. What does Hester resolve to do?

*Chapter Fourteen: Hester and the Physician*

1. According to Chillingworth, what does the council debate?
2. How has his appearance changed after seven years?
3. Why does Hester suggest that Dimmesdale is dying "daily a living death"?
4. Why doesn't Chillingworth "avenge himself" on Hester?
5. What is *fatalism*? How does Hester adopt a fatalist attitude in this chapter?
6. What is Chillingworth's view of sin?

*Chapter Fifteen: Hester and Pearl*

1. Describe Hester's feelings towards Chillingworth.
2. How does Pearl occupy her time at the shore? What does this reveal about her character?
3. How does Pearl demonstrate insight in this chapter?
4. What does Hester suggest is Pearl's purpose in life?
5. What does Hester do for the first time in seven years? What is the significance?
6. Why does Hester threaten Pearl?

*Chapter Sixteen: A Forest Walk*

1. Where is the only place Hester feels comfortable meeting with Dimmesdale? Why do you think that is?
2. What "companion" does Pearl come upon? Why is this significant?
3. What does the "old dame" tell Pearl?
4. What is Hester's reaction?
5. Explain the further significance of the setting—*i.e.* the brook.
6. Describe the change in Dimmesdale's demeanor.

*Chapter Seventeen: The Pastor and His Parishioner*

1. How does the narrator describe Dimmesdale and Hester's meeting in the woods?
2. Why is Dimmesdale so miserable?
3. In what way does he suggest Hester is better off?
4. What secrets does the narrator reveal in this chapter?
5. How does Dimmesdale react to Hester's revelation?
6. Again, what is the significance of the setting?
7. What is Hester's advice to Dimmesdale?
8. How does he respond?

*Chapter Eighteen: A Flood of Sunshine*

1. How does Dimmesdale react to Hester's boldness?
2. What metaphor does the narrator use in reference to the scarlet letter?
3. What does the narrator mean by calling Dimmesdale's sin one "of passion, not of principle, nor even purpose"?
4. How does the narrator's discussion of Dimmesdale's sin recall "The Minister's Black Veil"?
5. What does Dimmesdale resolve to do? What effect does his decision have on his demeanor?
6. How does Hester react?
7. Explain the title of this chapter.
8. Describe Pearl's connection with the forest creatures.

*Chapter Nineteen: The Child at the Brook-Side*

1. How is Pearl a symbol in this chapter?
2. Why is Dimmesdale afraid to interact with her?
3. How does the brook act as a barrier? Whose fault is the resulting division?
4. Why does Pearl hesitate to rejoin her mother?
5. Why do you think the narrator focuses so heavily on Pearl's reflection in the water?
6. To what does Dimmesdale compare Pearl's outburst? Why is this significant?
7. What negative impact does the act of kissing have in this chapter?

*Chapter Twenty: The Minister in a Maze*

1. How does Dimmesdale contrast the "Old World" and New England?
2. Describe the couple's "getaway vehicle"?
3. What is the significance of their departure day?
4. How does the narrator characterize Dimmesdale's journey out of the forest?
5. Describe Dimmesdale's secret urge during a conversation with a deacon.
6. What happens when he stops to speak to his oldest female parishioner?
7. How does he treat his newest convert?
8. What other temptations does he face on his walk, and how does he respond?
9. Why does Dimmesdale lie to Mistress Hibbins?
10. Describe the exchange between Dimmesdale and Chillingworth upon Dimmesdale's return to his room.
11. What does Dimmesdale throw into the fire? Why?

*Chapter Twenty-One: The New England Holiday*

1. Describe the morbid symbolism in the second paragraph.
2. What is the significance of clothing in this chapter?
3. Why does the narrator discuss life in England at length?
4. Describe the diversity of the crowd in this scene.
5. Who stands out above the others? Why?
6. What news does the ship's commander bring to Hester? How does she respond?

*Chapter Twenty-Two: The Procession*

1. Describe Dimmesdale's demeanor during the procession. What is the effect on Hester?
2. Who approaches Hester in the crowd? Why is this significant?
3. Where does Hester stand to hear the sermon?
4. Describe Dimmesdale's oratorical style.
5. Why do you think the narrator continually refers to Hester as a bird?
6. How does Pearl behave during the procession?
7. What role does the scarlet letter play in this chapter?

*Chapter Twenty-Three: The Revelation of the Scarlet Letter*

1. What is the community's reaction to Dimmesdale's sermon?
2. What is the effect of the sermon on Dimmesdale?
3. What does Dimmesdale reveal?
4. Why does the narrator "censor" the account?
5. What change comes over Pearl in this chapter?
6. According to Dimmesdale, what does the future hold? Why?

*Chapter Twenty-Four: Conclusion*

1. What interpretations of the third "scaffold scene" does the narrator offer to the reader?
2. How does the narrator vouch for his story's accuracy?
3. What is the moral message of the story?
4. What change has come over Chillingworth?
5. According to the narrator, how are love and hate essentially the same?
6. What is Pearl's status at the novel's end? Why is this ironic?
7. Why does Hester return to her cottage?
8. How, if at all, has the scarlet letter changed?
9. How does Hester become a sort of prophetess? What does she prophesy?
10. What is the epitaph at the novel's end? What does it mean? (HINT: "gules" means red.)