



Nathaniel Hawthorne's  
*The Scarlet Letter:*

Questions for Socratic Discussion  
by Emily Andrews





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# QUICK CARD



|                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| Reference        | <i>The Scarlet Letter</i> . Nathaniel Hawthorne. 1850.<br>ISBN: 978-1587263729  |
| Plot             | Hester is found guilty of adultery, and is forced by the Puritan elders to bear the shame of a scarlet “A” on her breast for the rest of her life. Because she will not reveal the name of her child’s father, Dimmesdale suffers silently from his own guilty conscience and the torture of Hester’s suddenly returned husband. The couple plans to run away, but instead Dimmesdale confesses his guilt publically. |
| Setting          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Colonial Boston</li><li>• 17<sup>th</sup> century</li><li>• Puritan New England</li><li>• Just before the Salem Witch Trials</li></ul>  |
| Characters       | Hester Prynne<br>Arthur Dimmesdale<br>Pearl<br>Roger Chillingworth<br>Townspople and government officials   |
| Conflict         | Man vs. Himself<br>Man vs. God<br>Man vs. Society<br>Man vs. Man  |
| Theme            | Law and Grace<br>Relationship and Vulnerability<br>Freedom  |
| Literary Devices | Symbolism<br>Hyperbole<br>Metaphor<br>Allusion<br>Imagery   |

# QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT: AUTHOR



## Who is the author? (18-21)

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born in Salem, Massachusetts in 1804 and died in 1864. He published *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850 at the age of 46. Although he had previously composed some popular collections of short stories, the publication of *The Scarlet Letter* marked the height of his popularity. The novel sold 2500 copies in its first ten days.

In 1842 Hawthorne married Sophia Peabody, a noted **transcendentalist**. The transcendentalist movement held to the inherent ability of man to overcome his earthly impediments and rise to greatness by his own efforts. In order to win Sophia's hand in marriage, Hawthorne spent some time living on Brookshire Farm, a transcendentalist commune. His experience there only served to further disenchant Hawthorne's perspective of the popular philosophy. Hawthorne's work would continue to be marked by a more sober view of man's capabilities and a firm belief in the inherent sinfulness of human nature.

Himself a descendent of Puritan settlers, Hawthorne's themes are colored by the Puritanical conviction of original sin. These religious leaders, as well as Hawthorne, held that all men are born tainted with sin through their father Adam, the first to fall.

Hawthorne, however, was also deeply troubled by his ancestral connection to the Puritanical John Hathorne, the only judge of the Salem witch trials who did not come to repent for his actions. In fact, Nathaniel Hawthorne added the "w" to his surname in order to separate himself from this past. This shame of his ancestors' legalism factors greatly in the themes of *The Scarlet Letter*.

During his lifetime, Hawthorne became great friends with other prominent American writers who shared similar thematic concerns. Herman Melville dedicated *Moby Dick* to Hawthorne, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow acted as a pallbearer at Hawthorne's funeral.

Hawthorne died in his sleep at the age of 60.

# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



## What does the protagonist want? (5)

Note: the protagonist of a story is the main character whose struggles form the basis of the story's action. With this definition, *The Scarlet Letter* follows the conflict of two protagonists: Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale. Both ultimately long for the same thing: freedom from the guilt and shame of their mutual sin.

Even though Hester continually wears the sign of her penance in the form of the scarlet "A," she cannot escape the scorn and isolation this revealed sin causes for herself and her daughter in the community. Since Hester refuses to name the father of her child, she and Pearl bear their shame alone. Dimmesdale, on the other hand, wrestles secretly with the accusations of his own conscience while he puts on a show of holiness for his congregation. Both long for freedom from their society, and more powerfully true freedom from their own sense of guilt.

## Why can't they have it? (6)

Hester's struggle seems to be primarily exterior, existing between herself and the society that continues to reject her and Pearl (Man vs. Society). While this is accurate, it is also true that ultimately she must overcome her own pride and come to terms with her guilt (Man vs. Self). The *penance* imposed on her by the scarlet letter does not naturally lead to her *penitence*. She must accept responsibility for her actions if she is to become free from the guilt of them.

Yet even after she has accepted responsibility and vocally repented to her fellow man, she must also learn to place herself back under the law. Although she suffers most directly under the earthly law of the Puritan rulers, her true struggle is with the law of God. Her instinct to run away to Europe springs from an ignorance of God's omnipresence. She cannot lay down the significance of her scarlet letter with her own hands; Hester cannot free herself. Paradoxically, she must both publically and personally acknowledge the standard of God's law, as well as her failure to live up to it, if she is to be free to partake of His mercy and salvation (Man vs. God).

Dimmesdale faces a similar battle. He must find courage to overcome his hypocrisy by making himself vulnerable to others through *penitence* by public confession instead of only inflicting a secret *penance* on himself. He must place himself under God's law by demonstrating his responsibility for breaking it if he is to find the peace of God's grace for sinners.

Hester and Dimmesdale must overcome Chillingworth's evil designs on the minister's soul if they are to find freedom (Man vs. Man). This conflict ultimately ties back in with the Man vs. Self and Man vs. God conflicts. Because Chillingworth masks his identity (and therefore his intentions) from Dimmesdale, Dimmesdale's own unwillingness to publically confess places him under the control of his tormentor. Only open confession can set him free from Chillingworth's evil manipulation.

**Are there other things in the story (people, responsibilities, etc.) that distract the characters from the main goals? (7a)**

Just as Chillingworth perpetually irritates Dimmesdale's conscience, Hester's daughter Pearl works to continually stir up her mother's guilt. Obsessed with the letter on her mother's breast, and full of embarrassing questions, Pearl brings Hester back again and again to a consciousness of her shame. Hester, although disturbed by this behavior, dismisses her daughter and begs the girl not to mock her. It is not until the truth is revealed and reality is introduced between daughter and mother that little Pearl comes to peace.

**Are there larger issues, (a larger context or frame) in which conflict exists and forms a background for the story? (7f)**

Although these questions mainly concern the experiences of Hester and Dimmesdale, the truth remains that part of the blame for the suffering of these two lies with the Puritan community. The two protagonists must struggle to find redemption in a society that does not teach or extend grace and understanding. As Hester and Dimmesdale search for truth, the reader questions the contemporary philosophy that acts as the backdrop to the story. In particular, the scene in which Hester begins to recognize that others in the community are hiding guilt suggests that the laws of the society foster more hypocrisy than reality. One wonders, then, whether it is Hester or the secret sinner who experiences more peace in Salem.

**What happens in the story? (8)**

When the story opens, Hester, holding her infant child, is being led forth from the public prison to begin her penance before the gathered people of the town. The magistrates believe they have shown her mercy; although the penalty

for adultery is death, Hester's special circumstances persuade them to soften her punishment. They "only" mandate that she suffer public scorn on the scaffold for a few hours, and then wear the symbol of her sin on her breast for the rest of her life. From the very beginning, Hester stands in defiance to those who would show her scorn. She looks straight ahead and chooses to openly show the scarlet "A" for all to see. Additionally, Hester has ornately decorated the "A," further suggesting her lack of repentance. Several years later Hester admits that this penance never did its work; her heart was not changed by the experience.

When the young minister, Arthur Dimmesdale, publicly pleads with Hester to reveal the name of her child's father for the sake of the father's redemption, Hester refuses. Yet baby Pearl looks in the minister's direction and coos with pleasure, hinting at some kind of spiritual connection between the man and child. At the same time Hester looks into the crowd and discovers a familiar face looking back at her on the platform. Her husband, absent for two years, has returned.

Back in her prison cell, Hester is told that a physician has been summoned to check on her health. This so-called physician is her husband, who instructs her not to inform anyone of his identity so that he does not have to share in his wife's shame. He also reveals his intention to seek out and torture the man guilty for leading his wife astray. Hester's husband then takes on the new name of Roger Chillingworth, and makes himself popular in the town with his medical skill. Before long, Chillingworth has worked his way into the community's affections, and the townspeople arrange for him to live with their beloved young minister Dimmesdale in order to care for his failing health.

Most people consider Dimmesdale to be a saint of such holiness that the earth is not a fit home for him. However, suspicious that Dimmesdale is guilty of fathering Pearl, Chillingworth continuously tortures the minister's conscience.

In the meantime Hester has made her home on the outskirts of town, where she spends her time raising Pearl and sacrificing herself for the poor and sick. Her charity seems to be more for the sake of appearances than for actual sympathy, although Hester refuses to believe that anyone else is as flawed as she is. Pearl grows into an "elf-child," refusing to show her mother extended displays of affection or compassion, frolicking about in the sunshine and flowers, and peppering her mother with questions about the scarlet letter and the minister who holds his hand over his heart.

Eventually Dimmesdale's guilt leads him to go through the motions of public penance by spending a night secretly standing upon the scaffold where Hester served her punishment. There he meets Hester and Pearl, returning home from watching over a death-bed, and the child demands that the minister return to the same place and hold their hands at noon. Dimmesdale refuses, and Pearl, in turn, refuses to show him affection. Chillingworth also meets the other three at the



scaffold and, with hidden derision, offers to take the minister home. This moment further irritates the sufferings of Dimmesdale and causes Pearl's harmful antics toward her mother to increase.

Hester refuses to share the meaning of the scarlet letter with her daughter, stating that she cannot pay the price of the child's sympathy. Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth all isolate themselves through their refusal to be open and vulnerable with their fellow creatures.

**How is the main problem solved? What events form the highest point or climax of the story's tension? (9)**

Eventually, Hester can watch Dimmesdale's suffering no longer and resolves to reveal Chillingworth's true identity to him. Meeting the minister in the forest on his way home from visiting some Indian converts, she takes him aside and tells him the truth about his situation. It is at this moment that the gravity of her actions fully resonates with her. Hawthorne writes, "Hester Prynne was now fully sensible of the deep injury for which she was responsible to this unhappy man" (Chapter 17). Accepting responsibility for the sufferings of another, Hester finally offers vocal penitence to another human being, something she has not done until this point in the story. After seeking and receiving forgiveness from Dimmesdale, the two sinners suddenly find themselves no longer alone. It is this relationship and openness with another human being that provides the first ray of freedom for them. They are no longer totally in solitary bondage to the façade they put on for the public. This climax begins to resolve Hester's inner struggle.

Hester's act of vulnerability also gives Dimmesdale back the strength and courage he lacked to seek redemption for himself. Although Hester is seemingly successful in convincing the minister to run away with her to Europe, Dimmesdale emerges from his triumphant Election Sermon (interestingly a sermon on hope for the relationship between God and man) and reveals his true, flawed nature before the entire town on the public scaffold. (Hester discovers beforehand that Chillingworth purchased a berth on the same ship by which she had hoped to escape to Europe, negating the possibility of her and Dimmesdale running away from their problems. Whether Dimmesdale is aware of this development before his confession remains unclear.) Dimmesdale finally takes Hester's and Pearl's hands in the full light of day. Perhaps the episode with Hester in the woods has encouraged him to seek openness and vulnerability in relationship instead of futile escape as the cure to his suffering.

Relieved of his burden, he dies on the scaffold, praising God for his mercy. This climax resolves Dimmesdale's inner struggle as he finds peace in his last moments on earth, and everlasting freedom in the next world.

**How does the story end? (10)**

After Dimmesdale’s death, Chillingworth realizes that he has lost his battle for the minister’s soul and fades into the distance. Yet just as Hester’s moment of vulnerability led Dimmesdale to his redemption, Hawthorne hints that Dimmesdale’s last act of confession has a positive impact on the antagonist. Even though his defeat leaves Chillingworth without purpose or identity and upon his deathbed months later, his final act is to extend goodwill and generosity to the symbol of his wife’s unfaithfulness, naming Pearl heiress to his entire estate.

Hester also seems to benefit from Dimmesdale’s example. Although she acts on her plan to leave Boston for the Old World, Hawthorne tells us she later returns to the place of her infamy to pick up where she left off “of her own free will.” Her acts of charity and the display of the scarlet letter are no longer forced by the society. Hester continues to wear her badge as an act of her own preference. She seems to now understand that her earthly freedom comes from willingly living openly as one broken under the law until that final day when, like Dimmesdale, she can take up her complete freedom in the next world.

The society also alters their behavior toward Hester. Young women seek her advice and all openly show her respect, suggesting that Dimmesdale’s act of confession influenced the community as well.

**NOTES:**

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# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



## **In what country or region does the story happen? (1a)**

The story takes place in Boston, Massachusetts, home of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and the surrounding territory. Salem and Plymouth Rock are nearby.

## **Does the story happen in the country or the city? What is the mood or atmosphere of the place where the story happens? Is it cheerful and sunny, or dark and bleak? (1b, d)**

The atmosphere of Boston is rigid and suffocating. Everyday interactions are marked by a solemn and somber attitude. The lives of the colonists are burdened heavily by obedience to the letter of the law. Strangely, Hawthorne tends to associate the village with sunlight, usually a symbolic indicator of right and truth. Where morality is legislated, one might expect every secret and private matter, such as Hester's sin, to be exposed in the light for all. The villagers should be able to walk through life together, seeing and knowing each other clearly. Therefore, it is ironic that in this sunlight there is actually no freedom for inhabitants to speak freely their true, human thoughts and feelings. The harsh sunlight becomes just another law they cannot live up to. It is this sunlight that the infant Pearl hides her face from when she is first led out from the prison.

Later the story shifts between this village and the outlying wilderness. Man's law does not rule in the forest, and there Hester and Dimmesdale are free to express themselves as they truly are. The forest is clouded, and the trees blot out the sun. It is full of vibrant, green life, but the shrubs and streams grow in a tangle. The wilderness is not tame. Little Pearl's antics in the forest hint that there is something about the freedom found there that is dangerous and out of control. Even though Hester and Dimmesdale can hide here and find momentary relief, the wild forest cannot support permanent human habitation.

It is worth noting that Hester makes her home on the outskirts of town, between these two areas. She is both subject to and apart from the law's reach.

**What words or phrases or descriptions does the author use to create this atmosphere? (1d)**

Boston:

“Amongst any other population, or at a later period in the history of New England, the grim rigidity that petrified the bearded physiognomies of these good people would have augured some awful business in hand” (Chapter 2).

“...there was very much the same solemnity of demeanour on the part of the spectators, as befitted a people among whom religion and law were almost identical...” (Chapter 2).

“...this roughly hewn street of a little town, on the edge of the western wilderness...” (Chapter 2).

Forest:

“...the bewilderment of tree-trunks and underbrush...” (Chapter 16).

“But the brook, in the course of its little lifetime among the forest trees, had gone through so solemn an experience that it could not help talking about it, and seemed to have nothing else to say” (Chapter 16).

“The forest was obscure around them, and creaked with a blast that was passing through it” (Chapter 17).

“No golden light had ever been so precious as the gloom of this dark forest” (Chapter 17).

**Among what kinds of people is the story set? How do they live? Are they hopeful? Downtrodden? Depressed? Why? (1h)**

Boston is a Puritan village, settled by those who left behind the Old World because of what they believed to be the vain, luxurious, and hypocritical practices of the Church of England. In turn, they founded their town in the New World with principles of strict austerity. Every earthly thing that does not have its root in spiritual, eternal value is considered frivolous and sinful. As a result the story is set among sad and solemn people, who believe they should set their minds only on things above instead of enjoying the things of this world. These people tend to be hypocritical, because man’s fallen nature cannot long live up to such an angelic standard.



# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



## Who is the story about? (3)

*The Scarlet Letter* follows closely the lives of four characters: Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale, Pearl, and Roger Chillingworth. The following questions are answered for Hester, though they could be asked of any of the other three.

## What does the character look like? (3d)

At the beginning of the story, Hawthorne describes Hester with a rich beauty and dark, luxurious hair. Over the course of the story she becomes pale and plain, hiding her hair in a cap. Her beauty only surfaces one more time, in the forest scene with Dimmesdale, when she first glimpses the hope of freedom from her burden.

## Make up a list of adjectives that describe the protagonist. What words or actions on the character's part make you choose the adjectives you do? (3f)

-Proud: When the reader first encounters Hester, she is holding her head up high and refusing to show any signs of embarrassment or shame while she is led from the prison to the scaffold.

-Willful: Hester refuses to let the magistrates take Pearl away from her and is not afraid to speak up for herself in the process.

-Sensitive: In spite of Chillingworth's cruel behavior, Hester feels pity for him as his hatred and cruelty begin to decay his former morality.

-Loyal: Hester will not reveal the name of Pearl's father.

-Independent: After a long period of isolation from society, Hester is not afraid to question the town's assumptions and prejudices.

## What does the character do for a living? (3h)

In order to provide for herself and her daughter, Hester takes in needlework for the community. Her work becomes the fashion of the town, and even the magistrates turn to her when they need finery for special occasions.

Although she willingly makes clothing for the poor or for the deceased, her skill lies in embroidering ornate pieces usually frowned on by the Puritans.

It is most likely not a coincidence that Hawthorne gave his heroine the talent of designing a façade, or outward appearance, for her customers. Her skill further emphasizes the motif of appearances versus reality.

**What does the character say about herself to other people? (3j)**

*“[The scarlet letter] is too deeply branded. Ye cannot take it off. And would that I might endure his [her lover’s] agony as well as mine!” (Chapter 3).*

Here Hester suggests the physical “A” on her breast actually symbolizes a deeper mark on her soul, such as sin nature, that cannot be removed. She also expresses the wish that she could selflessly take on Dimmesdale’s guilt as well, although she knows that this is impossible and he will suffer.

*“Here, she said to herself had been the scene of her guilt, and here should be the scene of her earthly punishment; and so, perchance, the torture of her daily shame would at length purge her soul, and work out another purity than that which she had lost: more saint-like, because the rest of martyrdom” (Chapter 5).*

Hester chooses to remain in Boston, hoping that the daily suffering inflicted by her social isolation will strengthen her spiritual purity.

*“God gave me the child!...He gave her in requital of all things else which ye had taken from me. She is my happiness—she is my torture, none the less! Pearl keeps me here in life! Pearl punishes me, too! (Chapter 8).*

Hester claims that Pearl is her one consolation in the midst of the town’s cruelty. Yet she also mentions that the child, a constant reminder of her guilt and circumstances, is her torture as well. As is often the case, true love is both the greatest reward and the hardest trial.

*“The helpful inmate had departed, without one backward glance to gather up the meed of gratitude, if any were in the hearts of those whom she had served so zealously. Meeting them in the street, she never raised her head to receive their greeting. If they were resolute to accost her, she laid her finger on the scarlet letter, and passed on” (Chapter 13).*

One could interpret Hester’s actions here to be the ultimate sign of humility. But her coldness and unwillingness to accept gratitude could also signify extreme pride.

*“Silly Pearl...as for the scarlet letter, I wear it for the sake of its gold thread” (Chapter 15).*

Hester lies to Pearl, refusing to open up to her about the true meaning of the scarlet letter. In this she isolates herself from her daughter, and makes light of the serious symbol.

*“I have striven to be true! Truth was the one virtue which I might have held fast...” (Chapter 17).*

Hester tells this to Dimmesdale as she reveals to him that she has not, in fact, been true to him by keeping Chillingworth’s identity a secret. She fails at the one thing in which she might have taken, and did take, pride.

*“She assured them, too, of her firm belief that, at some brighter period ...a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness. Earlier in life, Hester had vainly imagined that she herself might be the destined prophetess, but had long since recognized the impossibility that any mission of divine and mysterious truth should be confided to a woman stained with sin...” (Chapter 24).*

At the end of the novel, Hester admits in her old age that she once imagined that she would be the one to encourage total peace, openness, and love among men and women. As she matures, she recognizes that this is not possible for a sinful being. The “surer ground” she refers to may signify Christ. Still, she provides her neighbors with the hope that such a day is coming, although the “brighter period” may not take place on earth.

### **What do other characters think or say about her? (3k)**

“But she—the naughty baggage—little will she care what they put upon the bodice of her gown!” (Chapter 2).

“Let her cover the mark as she will, the pang of it will be always in her heart” (Chapter 2).

“This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die” (Chapter 2).

“She hath good skill at her needle...but did ever a woman before this brazen hussy, contrive such a way of showing it? Why, gossips, what is it but to laugh in the face of our godly magistrates, and make pride out of what they, worthy gentlemen, meant for a punishment?” (Chapter 2).

“...many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said it meant Abel, so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman’s strength.” (Chapter 13).



**What does the character think is the most important thing in life? How do you know this? (3m)**

With the meticulous care Hester takes to present herself to the community as a strong, silent, and obedient sufferer, it may be that she values her own image and respectability above all else. Yet, more than this, Hester treasures her own Pearl and boldly fights to keep the magistrates from removing her daughter from her care. Hester argues that they have no right to take the girl away, as Pearl is her only companion.

This struggle between a desire for a certain exterior image and relationship comes to greatly define Hester, as well as the book's themes.

**Do the character's priorities change over the course of the story? (3n)**

After spending the first half of the story worrying mostly about her own struggles and woes, Hester eventually comes to realize that she is also responsible for the sufferings of others. When she resolves to reveal the identity of Chillingworth to Dimmesdale, she lays aside her own pride and makes herself vulnerable for the sake of another's well being.

**Is the character a type or archetype? Are her struggles symbolic of human life generally in some way? Is the character a "sympathetic character"? (3p,q)**

When Hester committed adultery, her husband had been missing for two years and it was rumored that he had died. Therefore, while her sin is not excusable, it is understandable.

Even more so, the reader sympathizes with Hester because all human beings are flawed creatures and vulnerable to temptation. The reader can identify with her as she wrestles with guilt and redemption because all have experienced the failure of fulfilling the requirements of moral or human law.

**Who else is the story about? Is there a single character that opposes the protagonist in the story? In other words, is there an antagonist? (4)**

Roger Chillingworth is the antagonist of this story.

**In what way is he antagonistic? What goal of the protagonist is he opposed to? (4b)**

After returning from a long absence to find his wife the object of public shame and the mother of a child that does not belong to him, Chillingworth works to make sure that neither Hester nor her lover ever come to any kind of peace or

redemption. Seeking revenge, he hopes to endlessly torture them with their own guilt and conscience.

**What actions does he take to oppose the protagonist? (4c)**

Chillingworth sets out to find the father of Hester's child. Following his instincts, he becomes a close companion and confidant of Arthur Dimmesdale and seeks to confirm his suspicion that the minister was Hester's lover. During this time, and after having his suspicions confirmed, Chillingworth's goal is to manipulate Dimmesdale so that he remains ever suspended between condemnation and a means of salvation. Chillingworth aims to keep the minister tortured by his guilt, while restraining him from finding relief through public confession.

In this way, Chillingworth dangerously aspires to take on the role of God, who alone can comprehend, direct, and secure the condition of His creatures' souls.

**How does the author's description of the character inform you of his antagonism? Does he have any physical attributes or personality traits that mark him as antagonistic? (4e)**

The first time Chillingworth is described, Hawthorne mentions that he has "dim" and "bleared" eyes. As the eye is the vehicle for sight, Chillingworth's damaged physical vision hints that his spiritual or moral vision may not be fully illuminated either.

Chillingworth's body is deformed as well, with the left shoulder resting higher than the right. Again Hawthorne mirrors Chillingworth's twisted heart and mind with a twisted body. In the Bible, the book of Matthew describes a day when the sheep, or faithful servants of Christ, will be separated to the Lord's right hand. The goats, or those who did not follow Christ, will be herded to the left. (Matthew 25:31-33). Chillingworth's prominent left shoulder marks him as an instrument of evil.

**Is the antagonist truly evil, by definition, or is he merely antagonistic to the protagonist by virtue of his vocation or duty? (4m)**

While Roger Chillingworth's actions are motivated by an evil desire for revenge, his methods grow out of his training and study as a scholar. In his former life, Chillingworth devoted himself to the pursuit of knowledge. This single-minded pursuit left him with a sterile, book knowledge, lacking any kind of understanding of the human heart. Although Chillingworth knows about human emotion and relationship with his mind, he does not have the sympathy that



# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



**What is the main idea of the story? What aspect of the human condition is brought to light and wondered at in this story? (13e)**

Hester and Dimmesdale each try to find freedom from guilt and the law by isolating themselves from each other and the rest of their community. Instead, their isolation further strengthens the hold of their bondage. Freedom from their guilt cannot begin to unfold until they find true relationship through reality and vulnerability.

The tragic note of Hawthorne's story, however, is that their freedom cannot be completed on earth. In Chapter 18 he writes, "And be the sad truth spoken, that the breach which guilt has once made into the human soul is never, in this mortal state, repaired." The unattainable purity of the law condemns man as long as he is on this earth. Young Pearl's uncontrollable antics through the story illustrate the gravity of this truth. Conceived in the wild passion of sin, Pearl's behavior is named by Dimmesdale as "the freedom of a broken law" (Chapter 10). With no regard for any man or principle, she is unfit for fellowship in community. While on earth, when relationships are the key to freedom, attempts at living apart from the law are unsustainable.

Yet hope is offered when Hester tries to introduce Pearl to Dimmesdale in the forest, and the girl stands across from them on the other bank of a brook. Hawthorne writes, "Hester felt herself, in some indistinct and tantalizing manner, estranged from Pearl, as if the child, in her lonely ramble through the forest, had strayed out of the sphere in which she and her mother dwelt together, and was now vainly seeking to return to it" (Chapter 19). This passage suggests that Pearl's utter freedom belongs to a different, a spirit world. Hawthorne leaves his readers hope that while men must struggle with the law in this world, they may find total freedom and redemption in the world into which Dimmesdale passes at the end of the story.

In the meantime, men are left the gift of what Hawthorne calls in Chapter 11 the "Tongue of Flame" or "the heart's native language". The flaming scarlet letter acts as the gateway of communication between human beings. Open acknowledgement of a shared fallen nature leads to peace and freedom, if imperfect, among men.

# QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE: LITERARY DEVICES



## **What sort of language does the author employ?**

Hawthorne is known for his skilled use of symbols and imagery, but also for his long, twisting sentences. His prose is detailed and descriptive. Hawthorne also employs colloquial speech for his dialogue in *The Scarlet Letter*, having characters address each other with words like “ye” and “gossip.” As a result, the reader is dropped into the historic atmosphere of Hester’s world.

## **Does the author use hyperbole – that is, do characters within the story make gross overstatements to drive home an issue or idea? (15c)**

In the Introduction, or “Custom-House Sketch,” Hawthorne identifies his work as belonging to the genre of **romance**. The nature of a romance is to deal with the spiritual or supernatural in some way. Hawthorne participates in this tradition by introducing the idea of witches and the Black Man. He often describes Pearl as though she will take off in flight, just like the town witch Mistress Hibbins. Clearly Pearl cannot actually fly, but by introducing this overstated supernatural element, Hawthorne highlights the supernatural implications of his theme and the mystery of sin and redemption. Hawthorne’s subject matter reaches beyond this world.

As a secondary effect, the inclusion of witches evokes a connection with the Salem witch trials, and hints that these supposed outcasts, who refuse to whitewash their own evil with a façade, may be closer to freedom than even the religious Puritans, who became responsible for the slaughter of innocent lives.

## **Does the author use imagery – that is, does the author create snapshots of images in the mind of the reader for the sake of enhancing meaning, creating setting or mood, or developing character? (16a)**

Hawthorne relies heavily on word pictures to communicate deep truths that are better visualized than spoken outright. Three examples are listed below, but many more can be found in the pages of *The Scarlet Letter*.

One of Hawthorne’s most brilliant and potent image motifs is the interplay between dark and light. There is a false reality to the daylight and confusion in the

darkness, but in his “Custom-House Sketch” Hawthorne offers a third option in the moonlight. Describing the moonlight pouring through the window, he writes, “Thus, therefore, the floor of our familiar room has become a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other.” Here Hawthorne describes the atmosphere necessary for him to write a work of fiction, where real truths must be instilled into an imagined world. This image is echoed when the minister stands with Hester and Pearl on the scaffold at night. This time a meteor lights up the night sky, and Hawthorne writes that it is “as if it were the light that is to reveal all secrets, and the daybreak that shall unite all who belong to one another” (Chapter 12). The most effective illumination, it seems, is where light and dark meet. In other words, truth, like the art of Hawthorne’s writing, is best met where the light of day to day relationship is set in the context of the darkness of fallen nature.

Pearl’s reflection is also an important image in the story. The first time the image appears, the child is playing in a pond and looks down to see her reflection in the water. As though the reflection is beckoning her to another world, Pearl tries to join the other little girl on the shadow’s side of the reflection, but finds she is unable to do so. (Chapter 14) Many times Hawthorne implies that Pearl belongs to a different world, the supernatural world, that is as free from the law as she is. Unfortunately while she lives on earth in Boston, Pearl is unable to join that world.

Hawthorne also uses some Christological imagery to draw out his themes. At the very beginning of Chapter 1, he describes the prison door as “heavily timbered with oak, and studded with iron spikes.” Such a description makes the reader think about the cross, the place where a sinless man took the penance of all. Similarly Hawthorne often refers to the scarlet “A” as Hester’s “stigma,” a theological term referencing Christ’s wounds. These images paradoxically serve to remind the reader that no matter what penance Hester serves, she cannot redeem herself. She must rely on the stigma of one who bore all of humanity’s penance and only requires the sinner’s penitence.

**Does the author use metaphor – that is, does he make comparisons of dissimilar objects without the use of “like” or “as”? (16h)**

- The narrator compares Hester to Mary the mother of Christ. (Chapter 2)
- Hester calls Pearl the scarlet letter. (Chapter 8)
- The Governor calls Pearl a child of the Lord of Misrule. (Chapter 8)
- Mr. Wilson compares Pearl to a stained glass window. (Chapter 8)
- Chillingworth calls himself a fiend or demon. (Chapter 14)
- The narrator compares Pearl to a nymph child or infant dryad. (Chapter 18)

**Does the author use allusion – that is, do his characters refer to events, works of literature or people outside the story in order to deepen our understanding of things within the story? (17g)**

- When Chillingworth first sees Hester on the scaffold, Hawthorne describes horror twisting the features of his face like “a snake gliding over them” (Chapter 3). This image alludes to that first tempter of evil, the snake in the garden of Eden.
- When discussing how the townspeople believe Pearl to be the offspring of demons, Hawthorne mentions that “Luther, according to the scandal of his monkish enemies, was a brat of that hellish breed” (Chapter 6). According to Protestant Reformed tradition, during the Reformation Martin Luther encouraged the church to leave the path of total bondage to law, and strive toward the path of grace and faith. It is interesting that Hawthorne compares Pearl with this historical figure.
- When Dimmesdale moves into his new living quarters with Chillingworth, Hawthorne describes a tapestry on the wall that portrays the Biblical story of David and Bathsheba. David famously lusted after Bathsheba and took her into his bed, even though she was the wife of another man. Yet in spite of this sin, the Scriptures are clear that David was a “man after God’s own heart.”
- Although obscure, it is striking that when Pearl stands across the brook from Hester and Dimmesdale in the forest, Hawthorne echoes very closely one of the first poems written in the English language by a man known only as the Pearl Poet, also the author of “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.” His poem, “Pearl,” describes a father looking across a body of water at his deceased child who now resides in heaven. He sees his child clothed gloriously in white like a pearl, but is unable to reach her. Likewise Hawthorne’s Pearl seems to also represent the fulfillment of grace that comes with crossing over into the next world.

**Does the author use symbolism – that is, does the author use any objects, persons, pictures, or things to represent an idea in the story? (17l)**

One of the most powerful symbols in the story, and in American literature as a whole, is the symbol of the scarlet letter. The letter, the sign of Hester’s sin, at first serves to isolate her from the rest of her community. It is the token of her rejection and guilt. The longer she wears the letter, however, the more she is able to see the same scarlet symbol of sinful nature lying hidden in every human heart. This revelation causes her to despair at first. Hester would much rather have perfection be attainable, but ultimately it is this revelation that draws her back into a healthier community.

By the end of the story, other young women come to Hester for advice because of her experience and knowledge of the human heart. Shared sin nature, represented by the scarlet letter, allows human beings to put down their façade and live openly with each other. In fact, in the “Custom-House Sketch,” Hawthorne lays the fabric “A” on his own breast, signifying that he too shares this human frailty.

One further symbol employed by Hawthorne is the rose bush growing by the prison door. This rose bush both represents with its dark hue the wildness of sinful passion, and the beauty and growth which may spring from the resulting suffering. Pearl declares to Mr. Wilson at one point that her existence sprung out of that very rose bush. Like the rose bush, Pearl is both her mother’s greatest torture, and her most valuable gift.

**NOTES:**

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# SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS



1. Compare Hester's character with Dimmesdale's. What are their similarities and differences?
2. Before his death, Dimmesdale claims that Chillingworth's sin is greater than his own. Is this true? Why or why not?
3. Hester confesses at one point that the scarlet letter did not do its work of changing her heart. Why is that?
4. Discuss the symbol of the scarlet letter. What is its significance?
5. Describe the relationship between the setting of the village and the setting of the forest. What does each setting symbolize and which is better? Why?
6. What is the main theme of *The Scarlet Letter*? How do the other elements of the story (plot and conflict, characters, setting) serve to reinforce this theme?

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# STORY CHARTS



The following pages contain story charts of the type presented in the live seminar *Teaching the Classics*. As is made clear in that seminar, a separate story chart may be constructed for each of the conflicts present in a work of fiction. In particular, the reader's decision as to the *climax* and central *themes* of the plot structure will depend upon his understanding of the story's central *conflict*. As a result, though the details of setting, characters, exposition, and conclusion may be identical from analysis to analysis, significant variation may be found in those components which appear down the center of the story chart: Conflict, Climax, and Theme. This of course results from the fact that literary interpretation is the work of active minds, and differences of opinion are to be expected – even encouraged!

To give the teacher an idea of the various interpretations which are borne out by the text, several examples are presented here.

# The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne: Story Chart

## SETTING

17<sup>th</sup>-century  
Boston during  
the Puritan  
settlement  
of the  
colony

## CHARACTERS

The main participants in the  
action are Hester Prynne, her  
daughter Pearl, Arthur  
Dimmesdale,  
and Roger  
Chillingworth.

### Climax:

Realizing her responsibility for  
Dimmesdale's sufferings, she seeks  
and receives his forgiveness for not  
revealing Chillingworth's identity.

### Rising Action:

Hester keeps to herself and takes care  
of the poor to maintain her pride. She  
refuses to tell Pearl the meaning of  
the scarlet letter.

### Denouement:

Hester plans to run away to Europe  
with Dimmesdale, but he publically  
confesses his guilt instead and dies  
on the scaffold. This sets an example  
of full penitence for Hester.

## THEME:

Freedom on earth is obtained through  
taking responsibility for sin and living  
vulnerably with each other.

### Exposition:

Found guilty of adultery, Hester is  
sentenced to public embarrassment  
on the scaffold and a lifetime of  
wearing the scarlet "A."

### Conclusion:

Hester plans to run away to Europe  
with Dimmesdale, but he publically  
confesses his guilt instead and dies  
on the scaffold. This sets an example  
of full penitence for Hester.

## PLOT

## CONFLICT

Man vs. Self: Will Hester find freedom from guilt?

# The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne: Story Chart

## SETTING

17<sup>th</sup>-century  
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## CHARACTERS

The main participants in the  
action are Hester Prynne, her  
daughter Pearl, Arthur  
Dimmesdale,  
and Roger  
Chillingworth.

### Climax:

Dimmesdale, the pastor whom the  
town holds in great regard, confesses  
to being Pearl's father.

### Rising Action:

The townspeople continue to avoid  
Hester in public and the rulers  
threaten to take away Pearl from such  
a woman of sin.

### Denouement:

The society's belief in the  
attainability of perfection is  
shattered. Hester disappears to  
Europe, but returns years later.

## THEME:

A society that enforces legalism is subject  
to hypocrisy. Real community is built  
through mutual grace and reality

### Exposition:

The Puritan rulers force Hester to  
stand on the scaffold before the town  
and wear a scarlet "A" to mark her  
sin for the rest of her life.

### Conclusion:

Women look up to Hester with  
respect and seek her advice. The "A"  
becomes a badge of honor in the eyes  
of the people.

## PLOT

## CONFLICT

Man vs. Society: Will the Puritan community show Hester grace?

# *The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne: Story Chart*

## SETTING

17<sup>th</sup>-century  
Boston during  
the Puritan  
settlement  
of the  
colony

## CHARACTERS

The main participants in the  
action are Hester Prynne, her  
daughter Pearl, Arthur  
Dimmesdale,  
and Roger  
Chillingworth.

### Climax:

After Hester tells him he is not alone,  
Dimmesdale finds the courage to  
openly take responsibility for his sin  
before God and the entire town.

### Rising Action:

Chillingworth moves in with  
Dimmesdale and works to keep his  
guilt constantly irritated in his mind.

### Denouement:

Chillingworth recognizes his defeat  
and Dimmesdale finds peace,  
praising God right before his death.

## THEME:

Men cannot run away from their  
condemnation under the law, but grace  
comes through living openly on earth and  
finding ultimate freedom in the next life

### Exposition:

Dimmesdale looks on as Hester is  
punished and pleads with her to  
reveal the identity of Pearl's father.

### Conclusion:

Dimmesdale's confession leaves  
Hester with an example of  
reconciliation. She later moves back  
to Boston.

## PLOT

## CONFLICT

Man vs. God: Will Dimmesdale find freedom through redemption?

*The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne: Story Chart



