

The Scarlet Letter Study Guide

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For the novel by
Nathaniel Hawthorne



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Synopsis

*“ . . . in the view of Infinite Purity, we are sinners all alike . . .
the holiest among us has but attained so far above his fellows
as to discern more clearly the Mercy which looks down,
and repudiate the phantom of human merit
which would look aspiringly upward.”*

The Scarlet Letter is set in the Massachusetts Bay Colony sometime between 1640 and 1650. Hester Prynne has traveled alone to America to prepare a home for herself and her husband. In her husband's long absence Hester commits adultery and gives birth to a child. In accordance with the town's strict biblical law, Hester is punished, though leniently for that time in the colony. She is sentenced to stand for several hours on the town's scaffold exposed to public shame and to wear a scarlet “A” for the rest of her life. Hester's partner in sin, a prominent member of the community, remains silent about his own guilt, and Hester refuses to reveal his identity.

Meanwhile, Hester's long-absent husband, Roger Chillingworth, returns on the very day Hester must endure her public humiliation. He decides to remain silent concerning his own identity but determines to seek revenge on Hester's lover. He discovers the guilt-ridden man's identity, and by posing as a physician draws close to his victim and undermines the man's health and will to live. *The Scarlet Letter* examines the web of interaction between these characters and the themes of guilt, perception, and redemption.

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|------------------------|------------|--------------|-------------|
| 9. sedulous: | attractive | moss-covered | diligent |
| 10. impalpable: | pierced | intangible | unimportant |

Questions:

1. Where does Dimmesdale go in the middle of an early May night? Why?
2. List, in order of appearance, the people Dimmesdale sees out walking that night. What is significant about the moral character of the people and the order in which they appear?
3. What appears in the sky that night? What interpretations of this event are given by two of the novel's characters?
4. What have people begun to say Hester's "A" stands for?
5. What has happened to Hester's appearance?

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6. Who does Hester meet in the forest and why?

Analysis:

7. Contrast Dimmesdale's ascension of the scaffold in Chapter 12 with Hester's ascension in Chapter 1. List at least three differences.
8. In Chapter 13, Hawthorne says, "The rulers, and the wise and learned men of the community, were longer in acknowledging the influence of Hester's good qualities than the people. . . . Thus it was with the men of rank, on whom their eminent position imposed the guardianship of the public morals." Do you think the community leaders were justified in a sterner stance than regular citizens of the community? Why?
9. Pearl has begun to ask serious, thoughtful questions of her mother. What does Hester answer when Pearl asks the meaning of the scarlet letter? How is this significant?

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Dig Deeper:

10. Read Isaiah 42:1–3, 50:4–6, and 53:1–7, three sections of Isaiah that describe the “suffering servant.” Compare these passages with Hawthorne’s description of Hester in the second and third paragraphs of Chapter 13. What might Hawthorne be saying about Hester by drawing such a close comparison?

11. There are two pictures of Hester in Chapter 13. In one she is described as having “blameless purity,” being “warm and rich; a well-spring of human tenderness . . . a Sister of Mercy. . . . Such helpfulness was found in her,—so much power to do, and power to sympathize,— . . . so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman’s strength.” In the other, she is described as “marble coldness”: “All the light and graceful foliage of her character had been withered up by this red-hot brand, and had long ago fallen away, leaving a bare and harsh outline, which might have been repulsive. . . . Some attribute had departed from her, the permanence of which had been essential to keep her a woman.” How do you reconcile these two contradictory descriptions?

12. In Chapter 13, Hawthorne says Hester is not accustomed “to measure her ideas of right and wrong by any standard external to herself,” and “The world’s law was no law for her mind.” Read Judges 17:6, 21:25 and random portions of Judges. During the time of the Judges, how were the Israelites like Hester? From your spot readings in Judges, how well did the Israelites’ moral code work for them? Why might this subjective morality lead to error?

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Read Deuteronomy 12:8, Proverbs 14:12, and Romans 1:21. What does the Bible say about subjective morality?

13. At the end of Chapter 14, Chillingworth says, “By thy first step awry, thou didst plant the germ of evil; but, since that moment, it has all been a dark necessity. . . . It is our fate.” What is Chillingworth saying here? What is the problem with this argument?

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3. Pearl says no one made her, her mother plucked her off a wild rose bush. Pearl knew quite well who made her. Hester had taught her so well that she “could have borne a fair examination,” but she was being perverse.

4. Arthur Dimmesdale.

5. Roger Chillingworth has become Dimmesdale’s doctor. Some people say he was miraculously transported through the air from Germany to Dimmesdale’s house.

6. His health seems to be failing rapidly. People do not expect him to live very long.

Analysis:

7. Bellingham and Wilson are considering moving Pearl so she will get good, moral instruction in a more positive atmosphere. Hester argues that God gave Pearl to her, and Pearl keeps her alive and away from sin. Therefore, only Bellingham and Wilson are arguing for Pearl’s best interests. Answers about which is correct will vary. Both sides have very emotional arguments, and Pearl’s behavior certainly has been strange at times. This is a good question to review at the end of the book.

8. The scene with Mistress Hibbins reinforces the significance of Pearl’s presence in Hester’s life. Mistress Hibbins, who will in a few years be hanged as a witch, entices Hester to join her in the forest to meet with “the Black Man.” It is only Pearl that keeps Hester from this fate. “Had they taken her from me, I would willingly have gone with thee into the forest, and signed my name in the Black Man’s book too, and that with mine own blood!”

9. At the beginning, people believe Chillingworth has been sent by heaven to care for them and especially to care for their minister. By the end, however, people are beginning to see something evil and demonic in him. Answers will vary. Descriptions may include: mysterious, old, leech, ugly, evil, sooty, Satan, Satan’s emissary, diabolical.

10. Originally, Chillingworth seemed to truly have Dimmesdale’s health as his main concern: “He expressed great alarm at his pastor’s state of health, but was anxious to attempt the cure”; “He had begun an investigation, as he imagined, with the severe and equal integrity of a judge, desirous only of truth.” After awhile, however, he “strove to go deep into his patient’s bosom, delving among his principles, prying into his recollections, and probing . . . like a treasure-seeker in a dark cavern.” He treated Dimmesdale as a “geometrical problem,” then was seized by a “terrible fascination.” After he sees Dimmesdale’s chest at the end of Chapter 10, however, Chillingworth has “a quiet depth of malice” toward Dimmesdale. He saw something that changed curiosity to hate.

11. Answers will vary, but possible phrases include: “like a treasure-seeker in a dark cavern”; “a dark, but transparent stream”; “air-drawn lines and figures of a geometrical problem”; “a miner searching for gold”; “a sexton delving into a grave”; “the soil where this dark miner was working”; “animal nature”; “dig . . . in . . . this vein”; “the minister’s dim interior”; “play upon him.”

12. A tapestry depicting David and Bathsheba and Nathan the prophet. The symbolism is clear: just as the godly king David fell by taking another man’s wife, so too has Dimmesdale. Ironically, the demonic character of Chillingworth fills the role of God’s prophet, Nathan. This is only ironic foreshadowing at this point, however.

Dig Deeper:

13. Answers will vary. Possibilities include: Dimmesdale (D)—young/Chillingworth (C)—old; D—growing paler/C—dark complexion growing duskier; D—a true priest/C—Satan himself, or Satan’s emissary; D—minister/C—man of science; D—front apartment with sunny exposure/C—on the