The Scarlet Letter Study Guide

The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.

Contents

The Scarlet Letter Study Guide....1
Contents....2
Introduction....4
Author Biography....5
Plot Summary....6
Preface....9
The Custom House....10
Chapter 1....13
Chapter 2....14
Chapter 3....16
Chapter 4....18
Chapter 5....20
Chapter 6....21
Chapter 7....22
Chapter 8....23
Chapter 9....24
Chapter 10....25
Chapter 11....26
Chapter 12....27
Chapter 13....28
Chapter 14....29
Chapter 15....30
Chapter 16....31
Chapter 17....32
Chapter 18....33

Chapter 19 34

Chapter 20 35

Chapter 21 36

Chapter 22 37

Chapter 23 38

Chapter 24 39

Characters 40

Themes 44

Style 47

Historical Context 49

Critical Overview 51

Criticism 54

Critical Essay #1 55

Critical Essay #2 59

Critical Essay #3 63

Adaptations 68

Topics for Further Study 69

Compare and Contrast 70

What Do I Read Next? 71

Further Study 72

Bibliography 74

Copyright Information 75

Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is famous for presenting some of the greatest interpretive difficulties in all of American literature. While not recognized by Hawthorne himself as his most important work, the novel is regarded not only as his greatest accomplishment, but frequently as the greatest novel in American literary history. After it was published in 1850, critics hailed it as initiating a distinctive American literary tradition. Ironically, it is a novel in which, in terms of action, almost nothing happens. Hawthorne's emotional, psychological drama revolves around Hester Prynne, who is convicted of adultery in colonial Boston by the civil and Puritan authorities. She is condemned to wear the scarlet letter "A" on her chest as a permanent sign of her sin. The narrative describes the effort to resolve the torment suffered by Hester and her co-adulterer, the minister Arthur Dimmesdale, in the years after their affair. In fact, the story excludes even the representation of the passionate moment which enables the entire novel. It begins at the close of Hester's imprisonment many months after her affair and proceeds through many years to her final acceptance of her place in the community as the wearer of the scarlet letter. Hawthorne was masterful in the use of symbolism, and the scarlet letter "A" stands as his most potent symbol, around which interpretations of the novel revolve. At one interpretive pole the "A" stands for adultery and sin, and the novel is the story of individual punishment and reconciliation. At another pole it stands for America and allegory, and the story suggests national sin and its human cost. Yet possibly the most convincing reading, taking account of all others, sees the *"A"* as a symbol of ambiguity, the very fact of multiple interpretations and the difficulty of achieving consensus.

Author Biography

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born in the infamous village of Salem. Massachusetts, on Independence Day, July 4, 1804. His parents were Nathaniel and Elizabeth Clarke Manning Hathorne. (The surname had been written both with and without the w; Hawthorne chose to include it when he began his writing career.) Hawthorne's father, a sea captain, died far from home when Hawthorne was four years old. At the age of nine he injured his foot and could move about very little for the next two years, a time he spent reading literary "classics." In 1820, while working for his uncle as a bookkeeper, Hawthorne complained to his sister, Elizabeth, that "No man can be a Poet and a Book-keeper at the same time." This conflict between his literary interests and need to earn money would be a fact of Hawthorne's life for many years; it is made a specific subject of "The Custom House," Hawthorne's introduction to *The Scarlet Letter,* and the conflict is represented in various forms in a great deal of his works.

When he entered Bowdoin College in the fall of 1821, he wanted to be a professional author, but was well aware of the difficulties. On occasion he expressed reservedly that his forefathers, among them important Puritans, would consider such a career useless if not downright frivolous. "Why, the degenerate fellow might as well have been a fiddler"; thus Hawthorne comically evokes their stern judgment in 'The Custom House." But, however he joked, such forefathers were a very serious presence in Hawthorne's life and writings. One such man was John Hathorne, who was a principle pros ecutor in the Salem witch trials and one of the few official judges not to acknowledge the folly of the executions after the hysteria ended.

In 1842 Hawthorne married Sophia Peabody and they resided in Concord, the geographic center of literary transcendentalism, the idealistic philosophy that opposed both Puritanical and materialistic values. They lived in a home called the Old Manse, where transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson had written *Nature* in 1836. Hawthorne stayed at the Old Manse for three years, later considering them the happiest years of his life. He wrote actively during this period, becoming hope ful that he could earn a living by his pen, but still not securing enough income from the trade. In 1845 he moved to Salem and soon took a position as surveyor of the port of Salem Custom House. When the Whigs won a national election over the Democrats (whose sponsorship secured Hawthorne's job), he was removed from office in 1849. This was a troubling moment for Hawthorne and increased his guarded stance toward potential social and political instabilities, including feminism and aboli tionism. It was during this convulsive time in Salem, which included the death of his mother in July of 1849, that Hawthorne conceived and began work on *The Scarlet Letter.*

Plot Summary

Part One

The Scarlet Letter opens with an expectant crowd standing in front of a Boston prison in the early 1640s. When the prison door opens, a young woman named Hester Prynne emerges, with a baby in her arms and a scarlet letter *"A"* richly embroidered on her breast. For her crime of adultery, to which both the baby and the letter attest, she must proceed to the scaffold and stand for Judgment by her community.

While on the scaffold, Hester remembers her past. In particular, she remembers the face of a "misshapen" man, "well stricken in years," with the face of a scholar. At this moment, the narrator introduces an aged and misshapen character, who has been living "in bonds" with "Indian" captors. He asks a bystander why Hester is on the scaffold. The brief story is told: two years earlier, Hester had preceded her husband to New England. Her husband never arrived. In the meantime, she bore a child; the father of the infant has not come forward. As this stranger stares at Hester, she stares back: a mutual recognition passes between them.

On the scaffold, Boston's highest clergyman, John Wilson, and Hester's own pastor, Rev Dimmesdale, each ask her to reveal the name of her partner in crime. Reverend Dimmesdale makes a particularly powerful address, urging her not to tempt the man to lead a life of sinful hypocrisy by leaving his identity unnamed. Hester refuses.

After the ordeal of her public judgment, the misshapen man from the marketplace - her long lost husband - visits her, taking the name Roger Chillingworth. When she refuses to identify the father of her child, he vows to discover him and take revenge. He makes Hester swear to keep his identity a secret.

Part II

Now freed, Hester and her baby girl, Pearl, move to a secluded cabin. The narrator explains that there is a fatality, a feeling so irresistible and inevitable that it has the force of doom, which almost invariably compels human beings to linger around and haunt, ghost-like, the spot where some great and marked event has given the color to their lifetime.

Whether for this reason, or for others, Hester stays in the colony. She earns a living as a seamstress. Hester has "in her nature a rich, voluptuous, Oriental characteristic" that shows in her needlework. Although the Puritans' sumptuary laws (which regulate personal expenditure and displays of luxury) restrict ornament, she finds a market for her goods - the ministers and Judges of the colony have occasion for pomp and circumstance, which her needlework helps supply. She uses her money to help the needy, although they scorn her in return. Hester focuses most of her love, and all of her love of finery, on her daughter, her "pearl of great price." Pearl grows up without the

company of other children, a wild child in fabulous clothing. Even her mother questions her humanity and sees her as an ethereal, almost devilish, "airy sprite."

When Pearl is three, Hester discovers that certain "good people" of the town, including Governor Bellingham, seek to "deprive her of her child." She goes to the governor and pleads her case. She and Pearl find the governor in the company of Rev. Wilson, Rev. Dimmesdale, and his now close companion, Dr. Chillingworth. Pearl inexplicably runs to Rev. Dimmesdale and clasps his hand. Hester argues that God has sent Pearl both to remind her of her sin, and to compensate her for all she has lost. When they seem unswayed, Hester throws herself on Rev. Dimmesdale's mercy.

Rev. Dimmesdale endorses her argument: Providence has bound up both sin and salvation in Pearl, whom Hester must be allowed to care for herself. The men reluctantly agree.

Since his arrival, Roger Chillingworth has assumed the identity of a physician. His scholarly background, combined with a knowledge of New World plants gained from his "Indian" captors, have prepared him well for this role. But healing masks his deeper purpose: revenge. He "devotes" himself to Rev. Dimmesdale, whose health has greatly declined. Chillingworth takes up lodging in the same house as the minister. As time passes, an "intimacy" grows up between them, and they seem to enjoy the difference in their points of view, as men of science and religion.

Unsuspected by his victim, Chillingworth digs into the "poor clergyman's heart, like a miner searching for gold." The only clue to Dimmesdale's condition lies in a characteristic gesture: he frequently presses his hand on his heart. One day, when Dimmesdale sleeps heavily (perhaps having been drugged), Chillingworth looks under his shirt. He sees something that the reader does not - something that evokes a "wild look of wonder, joy, and horror!" From that moment, their relationship changes for the worse. Having mastered Dimmesdale's secret, Chillingworth grows increasingly ugly, increasingly diabolical, and his real purpose becomes more perceptible. Many townspeople become convinced that Satan himself has sent him to torment the young minister.

Part III

Dimmesdale's secret has a paradoxical effect on his religious career. He knows himself to be the worst of sinners, and his sin makes his sermons more heartfelt, and more effective. This success intensifies his inner torment, and increases his sense of hypocrisy. One night he wanders out and climbs onto the scaffold. He considers waking the town and confessing his guilt. Hester and Pearl, after watching by a deathbed, find him, and join him. By this time Pearl is seven years old, and Hester's reputation has improved; now many associate the "A" with "Able," because of her good works. Pearl asks the minister if he will stand there with them the next day at noon; he promises that they will stand together — not tomorrow — but on 'judgment day." A light suddenly

bursts in the sky, appearing, to some, as the letter "A." Their vigil ends when Chillingworth appears and takes Dimmesdale home.

Hester, disturbed by Dimmesdale's obvious torment, confronts Chillingworth. She entreats him to stop his vengeful scheme. He refuses. Pearl guesses at the connection between the reverend and her mother, but cannot wholly understand. She fixates on her mother's scarlet "A" in an ominous way. Worried that she has corrupted her child and both men, Hester decides to intervene and to tell Dimmesdale the truth.

Hester waits for Dimmesdale with Pearl in the woods. In the forest, the sun shines on Pearl, but never on Hester, who seems always enveloped in dark and shadow. Hester tells Dimmesdale all. The reader's suspicions about Dimmesdale are confirmed. .. 'Oh Arthur: [cries] she, 'forgive me! ... he whom they call Roger Chillingworth! — he was my husband!'" Dimmesdale realizes how full of deception his life has been. He and Hester decide to leave together and start a new life. Hester removes her scarlet letter and lets down her hair. For a moment, they are happy in their love. Seeing them, Pearl refuses to come until her mother resumes her ordinary appearance; she obstinately washes off the kiss that her father plants on her forehead. Yet the parents remain optimistic, and part with the promise to leave secretly by ship in four days.

The day before their planned departure is Election Day, and Rev. Dimmesdale gives a sermon, intending it as a triumphant farewell. His spirits are strangely high. During the sermon, Hester finds their plans going awry. Chillingworth has guessed their intent and arranged to leave with them — they will never escape him. As Dimmesdale leaves the church, his strength fails him. In front of the whole community, he reaches for Hester and Pearl, and, with them, ascends the scaffold. He confesses his part in Hester's sin, and tears open his minister's collar, exposing what looks like — to some — a letter "A". He asks for the crowd's forgiveness, and in turn absolves his own tormentor, Chillingworth. Then he asks his daughter for a kiss and, when she gives it, "a spell is broken":

The great scene of grief, in which the wild infant bore a part, had developed all her sympathies, and as her tears fell upon her father's cheek, they were the pledge that she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor forever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it. Towards her mother, too, Pearl's errand as a messenger of anguish was all fulfilled.

His breast finally unburdened, Dimmesdale dies.

Chillingworth soon follows him to the grave, leaving his money to Pearl. Hester takes her daughter to Europe, but returns alone years later. Hester resumes her scarlet letter "A" and her good works.

When she dies, the village buries her next to Dimmesdale.

Preface

Preface Summary

The author, Nathaniel Hawthorne, admits to having caused considerable excitement regarding his introductory essay, "The Custom-House." Having been fired under the umbrella of a minor scandal engendered by the Whig Party, Hawthorne is notably not happy with what he has been through.

His characterization of William Lee, the Permanent Inspector, apparently greatly angered the family. There are not many denizens of the Custom-House that escape his biting wit. Nonetheless, Hawthorne states, irrevocably, having re-examined the introductory carefully, that it could not have been written in a "kindlier spirit" and therefore will be republishing it as a whole.

Preface Analysis

Despite Hawthorne's lack of remorse, his characterization of William Lee as a creature without intellect, but with all the instincts of a four-footed beast, remains a hilarious satirical characterization.

The Custom House

The Custom House Summary

Hawthorne says he has been seized by an impulse to write another autobiographical essay, this time about his three-year experience at the Custom-House. His motivation for this is that the book, *The Scarlet Letter*, which is extracted from authentic historical writings which he found while at the Custom-House. In regards to the book he is, in fact, little more than an editor.

Salem, Hawthorne's hometown, is the site of a once-bustling wharf. It is now a repository of the relics of ancient warehouses and buildings, as well as the occasional port for a schooner or barge relieving itself of its wares. It is for these vessels that the Custom-House exists for the purpose of collecting taxes.

On occasion, indeed, still in Hawthorne's time, there is a bustle of activity and one can see shipmasters and owners, sailors and merchants clustering together to deal with their gifts of commerce. As this class of individuals provides a certain element of excited activity, the venerable residents of the Custom-House, old gentlemen, often asleep or mumbling to each other in their high-backed chairs, leaning against the walls, provide quite another spectacle. Beyond the Custom-House, in full sight if its arched windows, one can see the bustle of life parading before the shops of grocers and ship-chandlers.

Hawthorne remarks that, if you were to look for him in the Custom-House, you would be disappointed. He has been replaced by the winds of political reform. Nonetheless, he is a deep-rooted part of the Salem community. His ancestors are famous, the first a soldier/legislator/judge; the second, his son, also a magistrate. Both of these lofty gentlemen were involved in Puritan religious prosecutions- (the first against Quakers and the second against witches) and made a permanent mark upon the territory. After that, his descendents struck out for the sea- and were sailors and shipmasters. Despite his honorable background, he speculates that his descendents would scorn his present line of work as a storyteller and literary aspirant.

In this narrative, Hawthorne stresses his unnatural attachment to Salem and is glad for the fact that his children have had "other birthplaces" and will live elsewhere. Nonetheless, after considerable literary experience and connections, he took a position very much rooted in the history of Salem. He became a Custom-House Surveyor, a collector of taxes. In doing this, he left behind his substantial literary imagination and important literary alliances with the like of Emerson, Thoreau, Longfellow and elder Alcott. Accordingly, even his interesting, but unsatisfactory experience in the utopian Brook Farm, began to fade into the past. He became a public servant, a Surveyor of the Revenue, and nothing more.

In this essay, he describes his colleagues, many of which are veteran sea captains who have become half-comatose beaureaucrats; the younger set, mainly Whigs, who were

his political adversaries; the chief executive officer of the Custom-House, General James F. Miller and Willam Lee, the Permanent Inspector.

It is upon William Lee that Hawthorne confers on a kind of literary immortality in one of those biting commentaries on a person's character possibly ever penned. He describes him as a kind of immortal, immune to the ravages of time- a strong voice and a hearty laugh, richly attired in a blue coat, who walks with an athletic gait far beyond his age. Although a veteran of three marriages and the survivor of many of his own children, it was basically to the remembrance and daily delight in the delicacies of the palate to which his life and attention were consummately dedicate. In fact, Hawthorne describes the great sadness of his life as an errant goose, which, in the aftermath of death, tragically left behind a tough and unyielding carcass, barely fit to consume.

On the other hand, his portrait of the General, the head of the Custom-House, is more flattering. The General is portrayed as a great soldier and leader in ruin; sitting alone by the fireplace, trying to keep his equipoise, only occasionally did one see a hint of his powers and vitality. He was out of place, useless and without much of a future.

In this house of cobwebs and human sloth, Hawthorne goes on a few expeditions of his own in the Custom-House. In these expeditions, he has found some papers that were compiled by Jonathan Pue, a Surveyor of His Majesty's Customs just like Hawthorne. Included with these papers was a package, which contained a red letter, made from fine red cloth, about which were traces of gold embroidery- the scarlet letter itself, from which Hawthorne's tale is woven. Attached to this letter is a small roll of paper, upon which the Surveyor has written a kind of history of the story of Hester Prynne, whose story this is about.

At one point, after finding the package, Hawthorne takes out the letter and puts it on his breast, trying to figure out its purpose. Then, he experiences a "burning heat," like that of a "red-hot iron" and lets it fall on the floor. So, even in the introduction, Hawthorne brings a hint of the supernatural that will permeate his narrative in the words to come.

The Custom House Analysis

Despite the author's somewhat heavily-laden style, replete with historical references that have been long antiquated, Hawthorne's self-depreciation and biting humors stands out in this introduction to a gruesome tale of injustice.

It is clear that Hawthorne, from the introductory and from additional research, believes that his sojourn in the Custom-House as a tax collector was not among the highest moments in his life. During his stay, his job crippled his literary imagination. In his termination, it exposed him to public disgrace as a defeated, although utterly harmless, political foe.

As a respite from the boredom of the job and possibly to put some energy back into his rapidly, deteriorating literary faculties, he began to focus on a legacy of documents from another Surveyor, long gone from the Custom-House, a certain, Jonathan Pue, some of

which furnished material for "The Main House," another Hawthorne book. But the *The Scarlet Letter* was to be an unforgettable masterpiece, whatever its true pedigree.

Hawthorne's caustic view of Salem, his job and the cast of characters within and surrounding the Custom-House, his dry political commentary on the affairs governing his dismissal and the subsequent mini-scandal and his cynicism of the public dole is riveting and clever. One can readily see why a plethora of residents of Salem, relatives of those described in "The Custom House," public officials and workers and members of the Whig Party itself- would be absolutely outraged at its contents.

Perhaps the real puzzle of the piece is his claim to have experienced a scalding, supernatural heat when touching the cloth of the real scarlet letter. This sets a tone of unresolved supernaturalism throughout the book. Despite his worldliness and his sense of literary superiority, Hawthorne is not wholly ready to give up the supernatural.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The denizens of Salem stand outside the great oak door of the prison waiting for the prisoner to emerge. It is ancient door by now, studded with spikes and stained with age, a foreboding portal to the grim justice of the Puritanical magistrate. By the door, there is a wild rosebush, from which the author symbolically plucks a single of its flowers for the reader. Hawthorne hopes that this blossom's fragrance and brightness may serve to alleviate, if but for a moment, the travails of the reader, who is about to experience a dark and sorrowful little tale.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Hawthorne, even from the beginning of the narrative, seems to side with the victim of this tale of Puritanism. We, the readers, are, like-wise, the prisoners of this dark tale, needing the relief of this fragile blossom.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

The Puritan mentality was imprinted on the faces of the spectators who gather around the grassy area in front of the jail- stern, unyielding, solemn. All punishments, both for large and small actions, received much the same cold, unsympathetic, concentrated attention, whether it was a child at the whipping post or a witch to die on the gallows.

In this case, the women were particularly agitated. There was no real code of feminine conduct to keep them from seeking the best positions in the crowd to observe an execution. But this wasn't an execution that drove their excitement this day. It was the moral gravity of the crime- adultery. Some were offended by the light sentence imposed by the magistrate. The sum of it was that Hester Prynne would have to wear an embroidered "A" on the body of her gown. "Too merciful," one woman said. Why not a brand of hot iron on her forehead? Another cried for her death, according to the Old Testament law.

But before the women could get any more outraged, the jail door opened and out stepped Hester Prynne, clutching her child, wearing the great, embroidered red letter and flashing what might even be said to be a defiant smile. Hester was tall, with glossy, flowing black hair and black eyes, a kind of majestic figure, a beautiful woman. Prison hadn't dimmed her beauty, but may have intensified it. The women balked at her appearance, wanting to rip off her fine gown and clothe her in rags. A small voice in the crowd addressed her real punishment, the shame that she must carry in her heart. But most would not have heard her voice. The crime deserved something more substantial than a scarlet letter.

The journey to the scaffold, which was built besides Boston's first church, was difficult for Hester. The crowd was antagonistic and grimly expressed their love of the punishment she was shortly to endure. The scaffold was only really an impotent backdrop for her actual punishment, which was to stand beside by it in front of the crowd. She was not to be pilloried or hung this day, just wantonly exhibited, in all her shame, to the self-righteous crowd. Hawthorne recounts her picturesque stature as more representative of the image of the Holy Mother, as depicted by a Catholic painter, than one of a common criminal. And, as the crowd stared at the letter embroidered on her bosom, her mind retreated backwards and various scenes flashed through her life. One, in particular, included that of a slightly deformed scholar whose connection had meant liberation from this hellish place to a beautiful Continental city. As she stood there, now lost in her reveries, she clutched the child so tightly that it cried out. She looked down at the letter and touched it to remind her of the reality before her.

Chapter 2 Analysis

In this chapter, we see a woman, Hester Prynne, who has been subject to grave humiliation and prosecution, but is unbowed within herself. Although she experiences the external condemnation of the crowd, even feels it in her heart, she has not, to the chagrin of many, entirely lost her dignity. While standing besides the scaffold in front of the stern and mocking crowed, she recounts a rather normal life, a childhood with sports and school, an adolescence filled with domestic responsibilities and challenges and her hopes and dreams of a better life. There is dignity in her reverie, although tinged with sadness, as there in her posture besides the grim penal apparatus constructed by her Puritan masters, who have traded now their typically physical oppression for emotional humiliation. Hawthorne's tone, regarding the Puritans, is subdued, though biting. It is almost if, although he stands against them, he does not want his wry commentary to overshadow his description of their deeds, where they will be more compelling to the reader.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

As Hester stands by the scaffold, she sees a strange figure in the crowd. He is slightly deformed physically, a seeming visitor to the area, standing besides an Indian dressed in Native garb. The man is costumed in an unseemly mixture of civilized and native dress. Although, for the most part, he is staring impartially at the scene before him, for a moment, his eyes are convulsed by horror. Perhaps disguising his true feelings, he queries information from a fellow spectator. As the spectator reveals certain pertinent information about Hester Prynne and her abhorrent deed, the newcomer affects certain sympathy for the spectacle, an endorsement of the justice imposed on the victim.

After speaking with his neighbor, the stranger catches the eyes of Hester Prynne, whose absorption in the glance, excludes all other thoughts and emotions except those locked in by her riveting stare.

Shortly following this, Hester must now face John Wilson, Boston's oldest minister, John Wilson, who relates how he has argued fiercely with his younger, fellow minister, Brother Dimmesdale, about how to deal with the gravity of Hester's sin. Dimmesdale had argued against the punishment to which Hester has been exposed saying, "it were wronging the very nature of woman to force her to lay open her heart's secrets in such broad daylight." It seems as if Wilson is begging the younger clergy to opt for righteous harshness. Still, even Governor Bellingham, seems to pass the responsibility of Hester to the young Dimmesdale. Dimmesdale himself is a figure of contradiction, a learned, sensitive, very sanctimonious man, who is the victim of a frail constitution and a certain half-described apprehensiveness, touched on by Hawthorne.

Dimmesdale begs Hester to name the horrendous culprit who dared share the adultery with her. It would be a good thing for the man to share the "bitter, but wholesome cup" that Hester has been made to drink.

Although John Wilson warns her, Hester refuses, saying she will endure his agony as well as her own. Wilson then proceeds to give a sermon on sin, stressing at length, for over an hour, the monstrous letter that poor Hester must bear. Towards the end, her child wails and screams as Hester makes motions to quiet the child.

To many, after she returned to her prison, the letter itself seems to gleam in the prison darkness, shedding a foul luster in the prison corridor.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The Scarlet Letter is, above all things, a wrenching story of public shame and social retribution that seeks, somehow, to point to the underlying reality of psychological forces that transcend social influence and pressures. What is real and what is imposed by

society? What are the real circumstances of Hester's crime? Why is she so defiant and so brave in keeping the name of her paramour to herself, facing the further, continual condemnation of a society as curious as it is punitive about her crime? This curiosity appears to be represented by the young Clergy Dimmesdale, whose convoluted compassion is entwined with an impassioned probing of Hester to release the name of the guilty man, whose iniquity has fouled the civilized, moral code of the social order of Boston.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

When Hester returns to jail, we find her visited by the newcomer, who caught her in the strange glance when upon the scaffold. Master Brackett, alarmed by Hester's state of nervous agitation, but more so from the child, who is convulsed with pain, has thought to bring a physician to the jail. The physician, presented as a man well skilled in the "Christian modes of physical science," is introduced as Roger Chillingworth. Roger Chillingworth is a bit more than the traditional Puritan man of medicine, for he is a student of alchemy and Native American medicine.

Hester is very apprehensive of his being there. Indeed, he knows her well. One gathers he is, indeed, the husband of Hester, returned from his travels, only to have found her on the scaffold, announcing her adultery to the world. She fears he will take revenge on Pearl, her child. He denies he would do anything to hurt the child. He offers her medicine, too, a recipe he exchanged from an Indian for remedies as old as the alchemist, Paracelsus. She takes his potion, thinking she will now die.

Although blaming himself for her adultery, having taken a young wife while he, himself, was already in decay from age and deformed since birth, he should have known since they came down from the church steps after their wedding, that in their path would be one day that horrid scarlet letter, embroidered with the fire of hell. Hester tells him that he knew, that she never pretended anything of romantic love for him, yet she knows she has bitterly wronged him.

However, despite his willingness to partially allay her sin because of his own blindness and stupidity, he warns her that he will find the perpetuator, the man who took part in this sin against them. He swears that, although he shall seek out and find this man, he wishes not to stand in Heaven's Way and will not kill or hurt him in any way.

Further, although he could announce himself, who he is, and denounce Hester, he will not. He does not wish further dishonor to befall him. In addition, he makes her swear that she will keep the secret of his identity.

Chapter 4 Analysis

In the book, each character responds differently to the sense of sin borne in the harsh light of Puritan justice. Hester, though remorseful, carries with her a certain dignity that allows her, at times, to keep her sanity intact. Dimmesdale seems choked with guilt at his tendency towards mercy, whereas Reverend Wilson seems to revel in his self-righteous condemnation.

The most unique reaction to the sin is embodied in Roger Chillingworth. Although a victim of the sin, he acknowledges that it was his lack of judgment that propelled the two

into a loveless marriage. It is Chillingworth who heals Hester and her baby, yet promises that he will mercilessly probe the heart of the man who despoiled his marriage, paradoxically promising him no harm. He is a sensitive and enigmatic villain.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

In this chapter, Hester is freed from prison. Although she could leave Boston and disappear into a safer, more anonymous part of the world, she, like the author, Hawthorne, as described in the Introduction, is drawn to her hometown, the seat of her shame. So, despite her options, she will wear the scarlet letter in the midst of her oppressors.

Hester did not succumb to poverty, despite her situation. For she had a great talent, that of needlework. With this talent, she could create a multitude of commercially desirable merchandise- ranging from embroidered gloves to baby linen to the apparel of the dead- from scarves for the military to bands for the ministers to caps for babies, her needlework, except for weddings, was eagerly sought by her fellow citizens.

Besides sewing to survive, she used her skill to help make garments for the poor. She also gave them money. Except for the splendid garments with which she clothed the infant, Pearl, she had become the soul of charity, giving both her money and her time to the unfortunate. Often, despite the goodness of her actions, she still felt the contempt of both the poor and the well off for her presence, yet she persevered.

After a while, she began to develop almost a sixth sense about things. Despite the grace and public rectitude of those around her, she often sensed a hidden sin or nature behind the public mask. Could this be true? Could there be others as guilty or indelicate in their behavior as the remorseful Hester?

Chapter 5 Analysis

More is revealed of Hester's character. She is industrious and talented, and therefore can earn a good living for herself and her child. Yet she is compelled to give a good deal of her time and labor for charity.

In the midst of these kind actions and Hester's industriousness, she senses that perhaps her neighbors are not quite a virtuous as they seem. And, perhaps, her situation is not quite so unique. Is Hester beginning to see beyond the common morality projected by her neighbors to a core of weakness and hypocrisy beneath the surface?

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Pearl is a strange, impish child. She is named, "Pearl," because she is her mother's great treasure, yet conceived, sadly, in great sin, as far as Hester and her society is concerned. Pearl's character is robust and cannot be fully restrained by all the discipline that Hester can imagine. Despite the fact that Pearl and her mother are often made the objects of humiliation, there is something in Pearl's character that resists the justice of such attacks. She does not seek the company of the ordinary children of the community, but, if they were to approach her, she does not hesitate to fiercely drive them off.

In fact, Pearl, who had committed no sin, hated those who scorned her mother and herself with an unrestrained passion. This power was so strong within her, that Hester often wondered what had been given her, an elf-like angel or some kind of demonic creature, replete with the niceties of childhood, but masking something more sinister. There was a certain wildness in her eyes that Hester feared. When Hester tells her that she had been sent to Earth by her Heavenly Father, Pearl denies it but entreats Hester to tell her where she really comes from. Were the sentiments of her community correct? Was this child a demon offspring? Such is the ambivalence about Pearl expressed in this chapter and elsewhere.

Chapter 6 Analysis

In a society as driven by hate and condemnation as the Puritans, simple psychological explanations of behavior are painted over in lurid, red, demonic overtones. The whole of their society is colored with superstitious implications.

Thus, even a child as scorned for her mother's impiety as Pearl, is now endowed with some supernatural evil by her superstitious neighbors. Even to her mother, Pearl's behavior seems to betoken a more sinister undercurrent of strangeness than her, often, angelic little countenance would reveal.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Hester Prynne goes to Governor Bellingham's mansion with some gloves, partially to fulfill an order, but partially to petition him to stop the talk about taking her Pearl away, owing to her infamous deed and scarlet letter. Pearl accompanies her on this mission, whereupon, while waiting, they get to see the Governor's fine house, his oaken chairs and tables, his stately portraits, embellished and gilded volumes of books, as well as a shining suit of mail, the governor's armor, which he wears on occasions of state. The Governor is a soldier as well as a legislator and ruler. As Pearl cries for a red rose from the Governor's luxurious garden, the Governor comes with some company.

Chapter 7 Analysis

This chapter subtly comments on the richness of some of the upper class Puritans' lives, showing that their lives are not without extensive, material comfort. But whether this truly reflects on their true sanctity, Hawthorne remains silent.

BOOKRAGS

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

The company of the Governor is prestigious, indeed. His company includes no less than John Wilson, the elder clergyman as well as the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth, physician and well-hidden husband of Hester.

While John Wilson playfully speaks with Pearl, this is only prelude to a more serious conversation. Should Pearl be taken away from Hester, a disgraced adulteress?

But Dimmesdale comes to her rescue. It is precisely Hester, who though fallen, is now steeped in penance, who is capable of conveying a sense of perfect rectitude to her child. The Governor and his associates, including Wilson, seem to accept this idea. Hester is liberated from the fear of separation. Chillingworth, at one point, playfully suggests he analyze the child in order to discern who the father is but the Reverend Wilson protests. He decries the use of "profane philosophy in such a weighty matter.

The chapter ends with the rumor of a conversation between Mistress Hibbings, later executed as a witch, and Hester. Hester, in the alleged conversation, rejects Mistress Hibbings' entreaties to consort with the witches in the forest, but only because she has the responsibility of guardianship towards Pearl.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Hester comes perilously close to losing Pearl and is saved by Arthur Dimmesdale's entreaties. Pearl lays her cheek on his hand, as though understanding the great favor he has done for her. Yet, there is in Dimmesdale's comments about Pearl, that she needs no "witch's broomstick to fly withal," a continuing superstitious fancy about Pearl. This chapter is about superstition tempered with mercy.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Roger Chillingworth, Hester's husband under an assumed name, had chosen Arthur Dimmesdale to guide his spiritual journey. Having expressed alarm at his minister's state of health, what was Dimmesdale to do when the elders of his church compelled him to seek help from the impressive new physician?

Dimmesdale eventually accepted his lot as Chillingworth most prestigious patient and eventually became quite close to him. In fact, his parishioners were relieved when the two began to lodge together in the same house with a pious widow. With these arrangements, Dimmesdale became more dependent than ever on the learned doctor. Many thought this very good as it augured well for the minister's future health. However, there were rumors about Chillingworth. He had been a consort of an old conjurer; he has participated in Indian pagan rituals during his captivity; he was co-opting the fire from hell itself to feed the stove in his laboratory. Was Chillingworth God's friend or His adversary?

Chapter 9 Analysis

We still do not know much of Chillingworth's intentions or what illness is troubling Arthur Dimmesdale. Yet Chillingworth has grown quite close to Dimmesdale. There is, as well, a rumor, that Chillingworth may once have been called by another name. To some, there was a moral struggle brewing, maybe even a spiritual battle.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Although beginning with good intentions, Roger Chillingworth's investigation of his patient soon turns sinister. Instead of probing objectively, he has begun to look for the hidden sin or corruption in his patient's heart. Poor Dimmesdale faintly recognizes that something is amiss, but owing to his general lack of trust in all men- does not pinpoint Chillingworth as the source of his discomfort.

A conversation between Chillingworth and Dimmesdale allows Chillingworth to hear Dimmesdale's benign account of confession and thus the physician hopes to receive his. But Dimmesdale gives himself a way out. Some men cannot constitutionally confess and some men, as having hidden sins, cannot because it would hurt the good they actively do among their fellow men. In the midst of their conversation, they both see Hester and Pearl skipping happily through a graveyard. They wonder about the child and her capacity for good. They talk about Hester, Chillingworth remarking that perhaps it is for good that she has the scarlet letter because there is no hidden evil buried in her soul.

Chillingworth is pressing Dimmesdale to reveal is secret and, in fact, Dimmesdale confesses that he has one. But he will not reveal it to Chillingworth. "But who art thou, that meddlest in this matter?-that dares thrust himself between the sufferer and his God?"

When Dimmesdale falls asleep, Chillingworth comes in and pulls aside the priest's vestment. There, indeed, is something on the man's body, hidden by the vestment and covered always by his hand, that, upon seeing it, fills Chillingworth with ecstasy so much that he throws up his hands and stamps his foot on the floor.

Chapter 10 Analysis

In this chapter, Hawthorne makes clear that Chillingworth is a blood-sucking creature set upon the destruction of Dimmesdale. How he is going to do this is a mystery. The chapter ends with a strange discovery by Chillingworth. There is something on Dimmesdale's body that Chillingworth discovers. As with much of this book- and in particular with this discovery- the writer prefers to keep a shroud of mystery concerning it. In fact, this is one element in *The Scarlet Letter* that is never fully resolved. Nonetheless, it leads to the startling climax.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Chillingworth has discovered something about Dimmesdale that has motivated him even more to exact revenge, although he is not sure of the causes of his discovery. Although the reader is still left in the dark about many things, it is clear that the physician's revenge involves some kind of power over his unfortunate subject, perhaps through a form of sorcery or remote hypnotic means. Apparently, Chillingworth has the power to startle the poor minister with a "throb of agony" or "at the waving of a magician's want" to induce a thousand horrid phantoms to point their fingers at Arthur Dimmesdale's breast.

As Dimmesdale's guilt-based suffering is now amplified by the physician/sorcerer's revenge, the minister rises upwards in his prestige and acceptance by the Boston community. This veneration by the naïve populace tortures Dimmesdale even more. In fact, he is so filled with contempt and hatred for himself, so hopeful of purging his conscience and sin-ridden soul by pain, Dimmesdale indulges in a continuous act of self-flagellation, beating himself with a bloody scourge (or whip). In these sick vigils of self-affliction, he sees many potent visions, but perhaps the most exacting on his conscience was the image of Hester Prynne, pointing at the scarlet letter on her bosom and then- at the breast of Arthur Dimmesdale.

Chapter 11 Analysis

Hawthorne has tried to tell a story based on the most intimate penetration of the thought and feelings of diverse characters. *The Scarlet Letter* is psychological story telling at its best. Dimmesdale's reaction to his sin is not based on helping others like Hester's. Instead, he devises ever crueler ways to expatiate his pain through self-torture. He is the book's most tragic character and one of Hawthorne's best psychological portraits.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Filled with some strange impulse, Dimmesdale mounts the scaffold that Hester once climbed to advertise her shame to the populace of Boston. In an act of temporary insanity, he shrieks out, hoping, possibly, to awaken the populace and further cement his guilt. But, instead of this happening, events conspire to keep his secret.

Slowly, as if in a shadowy parade, certain figures, pass by, after having attended to the dying Governor Winthrop. First comes Reverend Wilson, who does not notice him. For a moment, it as if he had cried out to the elder minister, but it was only his imagination. But now he is found by Hester itself, coming from the same death chamber.

At that moment, a meteor soars through the heavens, lighting up the night sky. To Arthur Dimmesdale tormented faculties, it appeared to describe the letter "A." He stands there with Hester and Pearl and then, who visits him, but Roger Chillingworth? Now, the minister admits to Hester, that he hates and fears Chillingworth. But Chillingworth, ever the Pretender, admits no ill will towards Dimmesdale, but only concerned for his well being. As such, he is taken home by the minister.

Following a great sermon, the sexton gives Dimmesdale his glove, which was found near the scaffold. He relates to Dimmesdale about a recent portent in the sky- a letter "A," which stood for Angel.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Dimmesdale stands alone at night on the public scaffold, at times shrieking and then again laughing hysterically. But, there, fate intervenes. The characters of Wilson, Hester, Pearl and Chillingworth pass before him. Even when a meteor flashes across the sky, the townspeople interpret it as he does, as an "A"- but for "Angel" rather than "Adultery." Is Hawthorne giving Dimmesdale another chance to re-interpret his condition? Is he worthy for salvation from his own harsh, unyielding self?

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Through her quiet, unyielding charity; through her desperate perseverance to give more than she received; through her willingness to be available, even to those who scorned her- Hester had begun to change the public view of her. Even the leaders of the village begin to look at her in a benevolent way, while private citizens almost look at her as to gift from God to those afflicted with poverty or sickness. In her most private thoughts, Hester even thinks of reforming society, of changing the status of women. Still, she is inextricably woven to her letter and to her fate.

She realizes that Dimmesdale has no understanding of the terrible fate that has befallen him by associating with her husband, Roger Chillingworth. She is now determined to do something about it. She decides to talk to the physician. One day, while walking in the forest, she sees him, collecting herbs.

Chapter 13 Analysis

If there is a heroic figure in this book, it is clearly Hester. She would like to be a social reformer and change the society that surrounds her, although she cannot. Still, there is something she can do. She decides to vitiate the harm intended to Dimmesdale by Roger Chillingworth.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Hester contacts Chillingworth, while he is picking herbs. He immediately relates how a magistrate recently told him that some members of the council wished the scarlet letter to be removed from her person. She replies it is for providence, not magistrates, to do something about the letter. However, she has something she wants to talk to him about.

For many years, she has kept Chillingworth's secret, but now she tells him that Dimmesdale must be let alone. Chillingworth admits that he shadowed Dimmesdale without Dimmesdale realizing who it was. Chillingworth does not try to prevent Hester's promised actions. He says, "Let the black flower blossom as it may!"

Chapter 14 Analysis

Hester, at great risk, protests Chillingworth's taking advantage of her oath of silence regarding his true name. He has used his anonymity to draw close to Dimmesdale, who does not know that Chillingworth is her husband.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

Hester, after leaving Chillingworth, is very bitter. She admits to herself the depth of her hate for him. He had taken her, very young, into marriage despite the lack of love in her and, in this way, courted disaster. Still in the woods, her madcap child plays with the snail-shells and horseshoes and jellyfish, finally making for herself a letter A out of some eelgrass and placing it on herself.

Pearl wants to know what it means. Hester tries to answer, but cannot. Nor will she answer why Dimmesdale keeps his hand on his heart, in the same place as society has placed the letter A on Hester's bosom. Again and again, she asks to no avail.

Chapter 15 Analysis

Hester's complete honesty fails her. She cannot tell Pearl about the true meaning of the scarlet letter. Hawthorne connects Dimmesdale's hand (held over his heart) with the letter, a recurrent mystery in *The Scarlet Letter*.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

And so, as she has promised herself, Hester sets forth in the forest to meet Dimmesdale and warn him about his physician/friend. She is afraid of telling him in his study because of the possible interference by Chillingworth. So, hearing that he has gone to visit the Apostle Eliot, who lives with his Indian converts, she conspires to meet him on his trip home.

The child is, of course, playful, dwelling in her conversation on the legendary Black Man, who dwells in the forest with his witches. Young Pearl has heard the stories of old Mistress Hibbins and now hears that her mother, herself, consorts with him at midnight. Hester draws her back to reality, but then tells her that she had met him once- and the scarlet letter is "his mark." Then, Hester sees Dimmesdale, dismissing Pearl's mistaken notion that the forest-veiled figure is the Black Man. She now approaches him.

Chapter 16 Analysis

Hester appeases Pearl, telling her it is the mark of the Black Man. When a man appears behind forest trees, Pearl wants to know if it is the Black Man. Ironically, it is Dimmesdale, who is truly responsible for the letter.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

Hester approaches the Reverend Dimmesdale in the forest. At first meeting, both of them think the other is some kind of shade, apparition or ghost. Has Hester found peace? She answers by looking down on the letter. He has found only despair. But Hester attempts to refute his despair. Has he not found people who need and respect him? Yes, but it just makes him feel worse, as a hypocrite and a sinner.

She chides him for this. He tells her that in some way the letter is a blessing for her sin is an open secret, but his burns in solitary. It is "all falsehood!- all emptiness!-all death!" Touchingly, she tells him she, his partner in sin, is his friend. But now she reveals to him the enmity of Chillingworth. She tells him that he was her husband.

In his heart, the minister knew that something was wrong. She flings her arms around him and asks for his forgiveness. And, then, in a bright ray of hope, they forgive each other.

Taking the part of his adviser, she tells him that he must leave. But further, he must escape from Boston- either into the savage forest or by the high seas. He does not want to. He wishes to stay at his post until the bitter end, but she lifts his spirits. She tells him to opt for happiness. And when he fails again to take that option, he asks, perhaps, the most important question he has ever asked. Must he go alone? Hester says, "No," and we see they have both chosen happiness.

Chapter 17 Analysis

Again, there is a bit of irony in the title of this chapter. For the two meet in the forest as guilty lovers, not as pastor and parishioner. For the first time, it looks as though they may take a chance for happiness from this dark trap of Puritan justice they have fallen in because of their indiscretion. This is, perhaps, the brightest chapter in the book. But Hawthorne will shortly dim that light. This book is primarily about psychological darkness and Dimmesdale is his prime example.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

Hester's sojourn in the Puritanical moral darkness has strengthened her objectivity and forced her into a critical scorn of her society. She no longer reveres the black garb of their clergy nor their cold magistrates nor their instruments of punishment. She has become an outsider. Arthur Dimmesdale, on the other hand, has been trapped within their world, receiving its honors and demanding his conformity to their system of justice. Still, he knows the alternative to escape is his only hope for happiness and he knows that he loves her. He dares, for a moment, to feel joy.

Both of them, having given themselves over to the pain of their sin, have become half-dead people. But, now, they can move forward and not look back. Hester flings her scarlet letter away. She takes off her cap and lets her dark hair flow about her shoulders.

They see Pearl. Will Pearl ever be able to love Arthur? While they have been talking, she has been playing. But now she hears her mother and, decorating herself with violets and columbines, she comes to meet them, adorned as a nymph-child, at her elfish best.

Chapter 18 Analysis

Liberation is at hand for Dimmesdale and Hester. They have both, for the first time, committed themselves to the escape at hand. "A Flood of Sunshine" envelopes them as Dimmesdale, Pearl's father, is about to meet his child in his first appearance as a man that has transcended the prison of his life, who has opted to escape to happiness. Hawthorne dangles a happy ending before his readers.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary

Pearl comes out of the woods, reluctantly, to meet the minister, her father. She stands across the brook and, perhaps, jealous by the minister's monopoly on Hester's attention, she has a temper tantrum, which greatly alarms Dimmesdale. Hester believes Pearl has realized that Hester is without the letter. Hester has Pearl retrieve the scarlet letter from across the brook. She reveals to Pearl the happy life that will be in store for her with the minister. Hester brings her to him and he kisses her. But she washes his kiss off in the brook.

Chapter 19 Analysis

Pearl is not a happy confederate in Hester's plans. She does not return the minister's kiss with kindness, but with contempt. Pearl's ambivalence suggests a mournful undercurrent in what would be an otherwise happy setting.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary

Upon leaving the forest, Dimmesdale has more energy than he is used to. Yet, in this new freedom, there is something amiss. In passing a deacon, he pauses for conversation, but strange, blasphemous suggestions occur to him and he trembles for fear of the force inside him. Passing by an older woman of the Church, he cannot recall a word of scripture, but, instead, is tempted to propose an argument against the immortality of the soul. It is as if the hope for personal liberation from his past sins has freed terrible, unspiritual forces within him. Finally, seeing a younger woman, he is again tempted to say something to her, which will have a negative aftermath that will sully the lady. So he ignores her and marches on towards home, beset with these new temptations. On his way home, he passes the Mistress Hibbings, who is reputed to be a witch. She taunts him with the though that he had a more impure mission in the woods than simply making contact with the Apostle Eliot.

In his study, at last, he faces Roger Chillingworth He tells him he will not longer need his medicine. Chillingworth knows that his secret has been revealed- that he is not Dimmesdale's friend, but his most bitter enemy. They part congenially, each keeping their true feelings to themselves.

Chapter 20 Analysis

Dimmesdale's newfound tendency to conscious sin is difficult to fathom. Has he not been just liberated from a great burden? Has he not just tasted the first hope of real happiness? Unlike Hester, who has gained some liberty of spirit, Dimmesdale has not. He lives in the shadow of recent memories of self-scourging and his near downfall, when he shrieked out his pain besides the scaffold at the old church.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 Summary

As the stern denizens of Boston get ready for their public holiday, Hester seems back to normal, wearing the gray dress with the emblazoned letter. Today, with her other citizens, she will welcome the new governor to his post. Inwardly, though, Hester is different- for she believes her liberation is at hand. As her daughter walks besides her, she is besieged with questions about the rare spirit of this day. Why have people left their work? Why has the blacksmith washed his face? Pearl is absolutely taken with the idea of a holiday. Pearl has made arrangements to leave with the minister on a ship, at that very minute, in the harbor.

Pearl asks about the Dimmesdale. Hester warns her not to greet him on this day. She asks, again, about the hand held over his heart. All types of people are present for the festivities- the dignitaries, the clergy, a party of Indians, even the sailors just landed in the port. Among the sailors, the commander of the ship now finds a way to speak with Hester privately. All is arranged and, yes, there is a surprise. He has another passenger. It is Roger Chillingworth, who he says is a close friend of the minister that will accompany her.

Chapter 21 Analysis

As the grim tale unwinds, Hester's plans are marred again by Chillingworth, who has imposed himself on the couple's getaway plans. With sinister cunning, he now has made arrangements to accompany the couple on their flight from America. Hester, whose heart was full of joy, is now impressed with the diabolical twist in events offered to her by Chillingworth. He watches at a faraway corner of the market, smiling to himself.

Chapter 22

Chapter 22 Summary

And so, amidst this turmoil, the stately procession begins. Leading the way are the musicians, followed by various gentlemen in arms, their armor shining in the noonday sun. They are followed by the civil leaders of the government, the magistrates and public officials. Then comes the clergy, including Arthur Dimmesdale, who seemed more alive than ever before. Hester watches him with a kind of dreary sadness. Would she lose him now? Pearl caught the mood of her mother and looked at him curiously. She is besieged by Mistress Hibbings, who makes allusions to Dimmesdale's curious forest excursions, but she ignores her allegations concerning the minister and the Black Man and his mark upon him.

Dimmesdale gives a wonderful sermon. Meanwhile, Pearl plays in the market place. The shipmaster, smitten by the delightful child, throws her a gold chain from her hat. He tells her Chillingworth will bring the minister aboard. The minister looked down, as he preached his sermon. Hester is surrounded by the curious, who wonder about the lady with this scarlet letter. Hawthorne remarks how curious it is that the two are bound together by this ignoble symbol.

Chapter 22 Analysis

The story has become darker and hope seems to be fading. Even as Hester looks at the minister, it is as if a dark shadow has come over her. Still, Dimmesdale has made a successful march and given a rousing sermon. But Chillingworth has intervened in their happiness. Hawthorne casts a darkness over his story, which he had briefly lit with hope.

Chapter 23

Chapter 23 Summary

Dimmesdale's speech, the Election Sermon, crown of the day's festivities, is legendary, riveting and almost prophetic. After its over, the procession continues towards a great banquet, the culmination of the day's events. Many who saw the procession were inspired and it was as if the entire crowd was moved by a single voice into one giant shout of collective victory and happiness. As the procession marches on, Dimmesdale comes again to the scaffold, where he now sees Hester and Pearl. He opens his arms to them. Chillingworth comes out of the crowd to warn him, to keep him from revealing his identity. He has Hester help support him as he climbs up the scaffold, insisting to Chillingworth that he will now escape forever from his sinister intent.

Now on the top of the scaffold, he addresses the crowd in a high, majestic voice. He admits to his sin. He tears away his garment, exposing his naked breast. There, etched into his body, is a scarlet letter. Having revealed this ghastly marking, he sinks down, Hester supporting his head on her own bosom. Chillingworth mumbles again and again, "Thou hast escaped me." He asks God to forgive the physician for Chillingworth has greatly sinned against them. He asks for a kiss from Pearl, his life force now fading. Hester asks him if they will not spend their "immortal life together?" But he answers her only indirectly, speaking of the great harm they have done and the agonies of Chillingworth and the accursed symbol. The crowd murmurs with awe as he dies.

Chapter 23 Analysis

Although Hawthorne has clearly created a story, which basically condemns Puritan life and harshness, he has not altogether stripped it of the supernatural. There are overtones, beginning with his strange experience of the scarlet letter in the Custom-House to his constant speculations on Pearl's half-fairy/half-demonic origins to the strange meteor that carves out an ambiguous letter, "A" in the sky. Now, he leaves with Dimmesdale's stigmata, a letter etched out in his flesh, an enigma for the reader, certainly suggesting the possibility of supernatural intervention.

Chapter 24

Chapter 24 Summary

As if to further confuse the reader with his point of view in regards the supernatural, Hawthorne discusses, but does not reveal, the true nature of the mark on Dimmesdale's flesh? Was this just another consequence of Dimmesdale's self-flagellation? Did he mark himself? Then, there is the speculation about the physician/sorcerer Chillingworth. Did he put some kind of a spell on the poor minister? Or was this some kind of psychological consequence of Dimmesdale's forlorn demeanor, his obsession with his sin? To make matters even more confusing, Hawthorne points out that some spectators, present at his death, denied that it was there at all nor that his final words suggested such a mark.

Within a year, Chillingworth died himself, his strength ebbing after the loss of his victim. Pearl was given his estate and became very wealthy. Hester and Pearl, shortly afterwards, disappeared. There were rumors, but no one truly knew where they were.

Some years later, Hester returns to her cottage and began her life again, carrying the scarlet letter on her breast. From time to time, she seemed to receive letters from overseas, richly engraved with some kind of heraldic seals. Occasionally, she received rich presents, which lay in the corner of her cottage. And once she was seen to be embroidering a baby's garment with uncharacteristic lavishness, unsuitable for her brethren.

Somewhere, perhaps, Pearl had married and had a child. Hester, though, returned to wear the scarlet letter for the remainder of her life, giving of herself, believing in a new and better future. At one time, she had thought she might be a prophetess, but this was not to be her fate. Rather, she lived and died with dignity. She was buried besides another, a single tombstone for two bodies, their dust not mingling, the epitaph proclaiming their destiny together under an epitaph, which spoke of a scarlet letter engraved upon a sable field.

Chapter 24 Analysis

Hawthorne mingles superstition with biting social criticism. Did he actually ever touch the scarlet letter worn by Hester? Why did he write this novel? At times, it seems to celebrate the supernaturalism which is at the heart of the suffering of its main characters while, at other times, it seems to condemn it. The focus of the story is nothing more than a solitary scarlet letter, a tiny embroidered piece of cloth. Sometimes it seems that, despite its origins, it is a force for good. Whatever it is, it is not something that, like the book itself, could ever be completely ignored or forgotten.

Characters

Governor Bellingham

Governor Bellingham represents an actual person, Richard Bellingham, who came to America in 1634 and was elected as governor of the English colony in 1641, 1654, and 1655. When not acting as governor, he still held positions of power as magistrate or deputy governor. In the novel his character demonstrates that in the colony, as the narrator states in chapter two, "religion and law were almost identical." Bellingham is described as a "stem magistrate," who, in chapter eight, is convinced that Pearl should be taken from her mother in order to receive a proper moral upbringing, until Dimmesdale persuades him that the union of Pearl and Hester is a part of God's design.

Roger Chillingworth

Roger Chillingworth is the alias of Hester's husband. The two were married in England and moved together to Amsterdam before Hester preceded Chillingworth to America. Chillingworth is a man devoted to knowledge. His outward physical deformity (a hunchback) is symbolic of his devotion to deep, as opposed to superficial, knowledge. His lifelong study of apothecary and the healing arts, first in Europe and later among the Indians of America, is a sincere benevolent exercise until he discovers his wife's infidelity, whereupon he *turns* his skills toward the evil of revenge. Chillingworth is introduced near the very start of the narrative, where he discovers Hester upon the scaffold with Pearl, the scarlet letter upon her chest, and displayed for public shame. After surviving a shipwreck on his voyage to America, he lived for some time among the Indians and slowly made his way to Boston and Hester. Upon discovering Hester's "ignominious" situation, Chillingworth declines to announce his identity and instead chooses to reside in Boston to find and avenge himself on Hester's lover. When Dimmesdale becomes ill with the effects of his sin, Chillingworth comes to live with him under the same roof. Reneging on an earlier promise, Hester eventually discloses Chillingworth's identity to Dimmesdale. Soon after Dimmesdale publicly confesses his sin and, as Chillingworth puts it, "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!" Thus, his vengeful victory taken from him, Chillingworth soon dies, though not before leaving all of his substantial wealth to Pearl.

Arthur Dimmesdale

Arthur Dimmesdale is the young, charismatic minister with whom Hester commits adultery. Unlike Hester, who bears the child Pearl by their affair, Dimmesdale shows no outward evidence of his sin, and, as Hester does not expose him, he lives with the great anguish of his secret guilt until he confesses publicly and soon after dies near the end of the novel.

Dimmesdale is presented as a figure of frailty and weakness in contrast to Hester's strength (both moral and physical), pride, and determination. He consistently refuses to confess his sin (until the end), even though he repeatedly states that it were better, less spiritually painful, if his great failing were known. Thus Dimmesdale struggles through the years and the narrative, enduring and faltering beneath his growing pain (with both the help and harm of Roger Chillingworth), until, after his failed plan to escape to Europe with Hester and Pearl, he confesses and dies.

The Goodwives

The Goodwives are several women who discuss Hester's situation in chapter two. They generally believe the magistrates have been too easy on Hester and suggest branding or execution as appropriate punishments. One exception is a "young wife" who in this, and a later scene, feels pity for Hester.

Mistress Hibbins

Mistress Hibbins, who makes several provoking, if short, appearances in the novel, represents the actual historical figure Ann Hibbins, who was executed for witchcraft in 1656. Mistress Hibbins tempts both Hester and Dimmesdale to enter in the league of the "Black Man," who, as a representative of the devil, haunts the wild forest. While she is very nearly a comic figure in the narrative, the fact of her historical reality and fate remind us of the grim power of Puritan regulation and paranoia.

Pearl

Pearl is the daughter of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale. Necessarily marginal to Puritan society and scorned by other children, she grows up as an intimate of nature and the forest. Symbolically recreating the scarlet letter, Hester, in opposition to her own drab wardrobe, dresses Pearl in brilliant, decorative clothing such "that there was an absolute circle of radiance about her."

Like most characters in *The Scarlet Letter,* Pearl is complex and contradictory. On the one hand, as the narrator describes, she "could not be made amenable to rules." At one moment in the novel, her disregard of authority takes the form of a violent game where she pretends to destroy the children of the Puritan elders: "the ugliest weeds of the garden [she imagined were the elders'] children, whom Pearl *smote* down and uprooted, most unmercifully." On the other hand, at a climactic point in the narrative, where Hester discards the scarlet letter on the floor of the forest, it is Pearl who dramatically insists that she resume the potent symbol. The form of her insistence is particularly Important, for, against her mother's request, she does not bring the letter to Hester, but obstinately has Hester fetch the letter herself. This moment demonstrates one of the central conflicted themes of the novel about the authoritarian impos1tion of law and the willing subjection to it, or even embodiment of it. In this scene Pearl becomes the figure of authority to whom Hester willingly, if symbolically, obeys. Pearl eventually leaves with

Hester for Europe (though Hester returns), where, it is implied, Pearl stays and, with the aid of Chillingworth's inheritance, is married to nobility.

Hester Prynne

Hester Prynne is the central and most important character in *The Scarlet Letter.* Hester was married to Roger Chillingworth while living in England and, later, Amsterdam—a city to which many English Puritans moved for religious freedom. Hester preceded her husband to New England, as he had business matters to settle in Amsterdam, and after approximately two years in America she committed adultery with the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale.

The novel begins as Hester nears the end of her prison term for adultery. While adultery was considered a grave threat to the Puritan community, such that death was considered a just punishment, the Puritan authorities weighed the long absence and possible death of her husband in their sentence. Thus, they settled on the punishment of permanent public humiliation and moral example:

Hester was to forever wear the scarlet letter A on the bodice of her clothing.

While seemingly free to leave the community and even America at her will, Hester chooses to stay. As the narrator puts it, "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." According to this reasoning, Hester assumes her residence in a small abandoned cottage on the outskirts of the community.

While the novel is, in large part, a record of the torment Hester suffers under the burden of her symbol of shame, eventually, after the implied marriage of her daughter Pearl and the death of Chillingworth and Dimmesdale, Hester becomes an accepted and even a h1ghly valued member of the community. Instead of being a symbol of scorn, Hester, and the letter A, according to the narrator, "became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too." The people of the community even come to Hester for comfort and counsel in times of trouble and sorrow because they trust her to offer unselfish advice toward the resolution of upsetting conflict.

Thus, in the end, Hester becomes an important figure in preserving the peace and Stab1lity of the community.

The Shipmaster

The Shipmaster is the captain of the ship on which Hester, Dimmesdale, and Pearl hope to leave America for Europe. During the Election Day sermon in chapter twelve, he is smitten by Pearl's charm. He even tries to kiss her, and, when this fails, he gives her a long gold chain.

John Wilson

Another historical figure, John Wilson was a minister who came to America in 1630. He was a strong figure of Puritan authority and intolerance. In chapter three, where Hester is on the scaffold,

he prods Dimmesdale to interrogate Hester about the identity of her lover. In chapter eight he questions Pearl about her religious knowledge.

BOOKRAGS

Themes

Individual vs. Society

The Scarlet Letter is a novel that describes the psychological anguish of two principle characters, Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale. They are both suffering under, while attempting to come to terms with, their mutual sin of adultery in a strict Puritan society. As critics immediately recognized upon publication of the novel in 1850, one of its principal themes involved conflict between the individual and society.

Hawthorne represents the stern and threatening force of Puritan society in the first sentence of the first chapter, where he describes a "throng of bearded men, in sad-colored garments and gray," who stand before the prison door "which was heavily timbered with oak, and studded with iron spikes," and behind which was Hester. Hawthorne symbolizes the force of the Puritan's civil and religious authority in this "prison-door," which is indeed the very name of the chapter. Yet outside the door, symbolizing Hester, the scarlet letter, and finally the individual who dissents from society, is a "wild rose-bush." Th1S rosebush that stands Just outside the prison door, Hawthorne famously suggests, "may serve... to symbolize some sweet moral blossom, that may be found along the track, or relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow."

The action of the novel (what there is of action in this notoriously unmoving narrative) rnaintains the conflict of the individual with society, even to the end, where Hawthorne offers a perplexing conclusion. Beginning with the above symbolic scene, Hawthorne repeatedly attaches our sympathies with the individual against social authority, setting us up for a narrative resolution where the individual breaks free from Imposed constraints Yet Hester, after she leaves America for a time, returns to the place of her punishment and willingly resumes the Imposed symbol of her guilt and shame Thus we are left with thiS principal thematic conflict to resolve on our own.

Change and Transformation

Closely related to the conflict of the individual and society is the theme of stability, change, and transformation One of the important places where this theme is introduced is actually outside the proper narrative, in Hawthorne's introduction, "The Custom-House."

In "The Custom-House" Hawthorne informs us about his actual job as the commissioner of the custom house in Salem, Massachusetts. Given the job as a political appointment, Hawthorne was responsible for the inspection and regulation of merchant ships that landed in Salem. In his endless partiality to symbols, Hawthorne describes "an enormous specimen of the American eagle, with outspread Wings" that "hovers" before the Custom-House entrance and appears "by the fierceness of her beak and eye and

the general truculency of her attitude to ... warn all citizens" of disrupting the Custom-House affairs. Here is a symbol of stable authority necessarily connected to Hawthorne himself, insofar as he is chief official of the Custom-House. Yet this firm symbol of civil authority is immediately compromised by the context of decay in which it is placed. Hawthorne notes that the wharves of Salem have been left "to crumble to ruin" and that the port "exhibits few or no symptoms of commercial life" Even the pavement around the Custom-House "has grass enough growing in its chinks to show that It has not, of late days, been worn by any multitudinous resort of business."

But these signs of creeping transformation are replaced by Hawthorne's obviously uncomfortable representation of sudden, even violent change, which in fact struck him personally. Due to the political nature of Hawthorne's appointment, when Zachary Taylor won the Presidential election of 1848, Hawthorne was promptly removed from office. Viewing himself as politically harmless, Hawthorne had felt his "prospect of retaining office to be better than [that of his] Democratic brethren. But who can see an inch into futurity, beyond his nose? My own head was the first that fell!" With his guillotine metaphor, Hawthorne evokes the great violent revolutions then sweeping Europe. Critics now agree that he greatly feared the possibility of such dramatic change in America.

Ambiguity

Critical consensus has come to regard the issue of ambiguity and knowledge rather than ones of deception and truth, as a central, If not *the* central, theme in the novel. Truth and deception imply a firm moral order, the very possibility of which the novel repeatedly draws into question. Ambiguity, which implies the incapacity to *know* anything for certain, is much closer to what the novel describes One of the most profound expressions of ambiguity surrounds Arthur Dimmesdale, for it is the truth of sin that he keeps hidden which makes him the very pillar of moral purity in the community. In fact, exactly because he confesses his impurity he becomes a more powerful figure of virtue: "He had told his bearers that he was altogether vile, a viler companion of the vilest, the warts of sinners, a thing of unimaginable iniquity. They heard it all, and did but reverence him the more." The "truth" about the minister, sinner or sinless, is forever suspended Thus, even after the narrator records Dimmesdale's public confession of his affair with Hester, the very notion that he was Hester's lover remains inconclusive. Some people maintain that they saw a stigmata of the scarlet letter on Dimmesdale's chest, others present say they saw nothing at all Some even claim that he did not confess "the slightest connection, on his part, with the guilt for which Hester Prynne had so long worn the scarlet letter." As the narrator says, 'The reader may choose among these theories."

Another moment where the lure of truth is presented yet left undisclosed occurs in chapter nineteen, where the narrator tells us that Pearl "had been offered to the world as the living hieroglyphic,

in which was revealed the secret [Hester and Dimmesdale] so darkly sought to hide,—all written in this symbol,—all plainly manifest,—had there been a prophet or magician skilled to read the character of flame." Truth is plain, but its language is hard to interpret.

Guilt and Innocence Sin

The Scarlet Letter is without question a novel about sin and guilt, though, as we should expect of Hawthorne, it is not a simple matter to determine who, or what, is the subject of these themes. Are Hester and Dimmesdale the principle sinners, or does their suffering, if not their love, absolve them? If we assume that the novel is an allegory, involving significant episodes and issues from American history, particularly the Salem witch trials, then is it America itself that is guilty of great sin? If this is the case (and many critics feel that it is), then we should reverse the most obvious terms of guilt and sin that the novel presents and read the representatives of authority as the principal figures of guilt. Following this line of interpretation, we can see Hawthorne attempting to individualize national sin in the actual historical characters of Governor Bellingham and John Wilson. We can even take this reading one step further and see Hawthorne attempting to absolve himself and his own family lineage when we recall that one of his own forefathers, John Hathorne, was a particularly cruel prosecutor during the witch hysteria. Whether absolution is rendered is a matter for the reader to decide.

BOOKRAGS

Style

Narrator

One of the most obvious problems when discussing *The Scarlet Letter* is determining the Identity of the narrator. This difficulty is clearly intentional In the second paragraph of "The Custom-House,", Hawthorne claims that he is merely "explaining how a large portion of the following pages came into [his] possession," hoping to offer "proofs of the authenticity of a narrative therein contained." Hawthorne proclaims himself only an editor, "or very little more." Yet later he states that "I have allowed myself... nearly or altogether as much license as if the facts had been entirely of my own invention,'" and all he is willing to verify is "the authenticity of the outline" Thus Hawthorne's characteristic use of ambiguity is both a central theme and a central technique of the novel.

Symbolism

The Scarlet Letter is rich WIth symbols; m fact, it is largely regarded as the first symbolic novel in America. A symbol is, like a metaphor, something that stands for, or represents, something else: an object, a person, even an idea. But the term "symbol" is used to describe a substitution with more power, or profound meaning, for which the term "metaphor" is inadequate. Of course, the scarlet letter itself is the principal symbol in the novel, but there are many others. In the first chapter the wild rosebush symbolizes dissent in its reference to the historical figure Anne Hutchinson, who led a group of religious dissenters in colonial Massachusetts. It also symbolizes Hester and even anticipates the scarlet letter that she wears Individuals in the novel can also be understood as symbols. For instance, Arthur Dimmesdale, with all of his profound pain and suffering, is symbolic of the high value of truth and the irony of its unattainability.

Setting

Another of Hawthorne's techniques, one that so effectively immerses us in the atmosphere of his story, is his use of setting. The entire novel takes place in and around the small colonial town of Boston, Massachusetts. As Hawthorne describes it, the town is situated precariously between the sea and the great "wilderness" of unsettled America. What lies outside the town is a "black forest," strongly symbolic of moral absence and evil. Thus the narrator describes a "footpath" that straggled onward into the "mystery of the primeval forest.

This [forest] hemmed it in so narrowly, and stood so black and dense on either side... that, to Hester's mind, It Imaged not amiss the moral wilderness in which she had so long been wandering." Here we see an almost claustrophobic pressure being evoked, which alludes to not only Hester but also the community of which she is a part, always facing the possibility of moral failure

As seen above, Hawthorne uses color adeptly in his description of settings. Besides the black wilderness there is the gray of the village and its inhabitants, who, as the narrator describes, "seemed never to have known a youthful era." Even though It was in fact a young settlement, the town Jail "was already marked with weather stains and other indications of age, which gave a yet darker aspect to its... gloomy front." In fact, it is precisely the dark and gloomy depiction of the town that helps to provide a tension with the forest, as if the town were already much like the forest and therefore more liable to be absorbed by its influence.

Ambiguity

While the importance of ambiguity as a theme has already been emphasized, it must still be described as one of Hawthorne's most important techniques. Repeatedly, where the reader expects to be given sure information, Hawthorne qualifies and withdraws assurance to the point that the reader is often left frustrated. In chapter sixteen even the small forest brook by which Hester discards the scarlet letter threatens Hawthorne's narration with the disclosure of meaning, and so, the surrounding "giant trees and boulders of granite seemed intent on making a mystery of the course of this small brook; fearing perhaps, that, with its never-ceasing loquacity, it should whisper tales out of the heart of the old forest whence it flowed, or mirror its revelations on the smooth surface of a pool." Hawthorne renders this beautiful passage to remind the reader, seemingly at every turn, that meaning, or truth, will be profoundly difficult to uncover.

Historical Context

The Transcendentalist Movement

The Scarlet Letter, which takes as its principal subject colonial seventeenth-century New England, was written and published in the middle of the nineteenth century. Hawthorne began writing the novel in 1849, after his dismissal from the Custom-House, and it was published in 1850. The discrepancy between the time represented in the novel and the time of its production has often been a point of confusion to students. Because Hawthorne took an earlier time as his subject, the novel is considered a historical romance written in the midst of the American literary movement called transcendentalism (c. 1836-60).

The principle writers of transcendentalism included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and W H Channing. Transcendentalism was, broadly speaking, a reaction against the rationalism of the previous century and the religious orthodoxy of Calvinist New England Transcendentalism stressed the romantic tenets of mysticism, idealism, and individualism. In religious terms it saw God not as a distant and harsh authority, but as an essential aspect of the individual and the natural world, which were themselves considered inseparable. Because of this profound unity of all matter, human and natural, knowledge of the world i laws could be obtained through a kind of mystical rapture with the world This type of experience was perhaps most famously explained in Emerson's *Nature,* where he wrote, "I become a transparent eyeball, I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part and parcel of God."

Even though Hawthorne was close to many transcendentalists, including Emerson, and even though he lived for a while at the transcendentalist experimental community of Brook Farm, he was rather peripheral to the movement Hawthorne even pokes fun at Brook Farm and his transcendentalist contemporaries in "The Custom-House," referring to them as his "dreamy brethren indulging in fantastic speculation." Where they saw the possibilities of achieving knowledge through mystical experience, Hawthorne was far more skeptical

Abolitionism and Revolution

More mportant, to Hawthorne's literary productions, and particularly *The Scarlet Letter,* was abolitionism and European revolution. These, in Hawthorne's view, were episodes of threatening instability Abolitionism was the nineteenth-century movement to end slavery in the United States. Though it varied in intensity, abolitionism contained a very radical strain that helped to fonn a climate for John Brown's capture of Harpers Ferry in 1859 (John Brown intended to establish a base for armed slave insurrection.) The rising intensity and violence of abolitionism was an Important cause of the Civil War. Hawthorne's conservative position in relation to abolitionism did not necessarily mean

that he was pro-slavery, but he did quite clearly oppose abolitionists, writing that slavery was "one of those evils which divine Providence does not leave to be remedied by human contrivances."

What Hawthorne feared were violent disruptions of the social order like those that were happening in Europe at the time he wrote *The Scarlet Letter.* The bloody social upheaval that most interested Americans began in France in 1848. This, and other revolutions of the period, pitted the lower and middle classes against established power and authority. While the revolutions eventually failed, they were largely waged under the banner of socialism, and it was this fact that caused concern in America; as one journalist wrote, as quoted by Bercovitch, here there were "foreboding shadows" of "Communism, Socialism, Pillage, Murder, Anarchy, and the Guillotine vs. Law and Order, Family and Property." Critics have recently pointed to Hawthorne's guillotine imagery in "The Customhouse" (where he even suggests the title "The Posthumous Papers of a Decapitated Surveyor" for his tale) and metaphors of his own victimization as some evidence of his sympathies with regard to revolution and social order.

The Puritan Colonies

The novel was written in the mid-nineteenth century, but it takes the mid-seventeenth century for the events it describes (1642-49). The Massachusetts Bay Colony was established by John Winthorp (whose death is represented near the center of the novel) and other Puritans in 1630. They sought to establish an ideal community in America that could act as a model of influence for what they saw as a corrupt civil and religious order in England. This sense of mission was the center of their religious and social identity. Directed toward the realization of such an ideal, the Puritans required a strict moral regulation; anyone in the community who sinned threatened not only their soul, but the very possibility of civil and religious perfection in America *and* in England. Not coincidentally, the years Hawthorne chose to represent in *The Scarlet Letter* were the same as those of the English Civil War fought between King Charles I and the Puritan Parliament; the latter was naturally supported by the New England colonists.

Critical Overview

Most reviewers gave Hawthorne's novel high praise at the time of its publication. Evert A. Duyckinck, one of the most influential critics of his day, called the tale a "psychological romance..., a study of character in which the human heart is anatomized, carefully, elaborately, and with striking poetic and dramatic power." He also praised Hawthorne's departure from the overly ornate writing style popular at the time, which displayed "artifice and effort at the expense of nature and ease." Duyckinck's review was supported by that of Edwin Percy Whipple, who considered the novel "deep in thought and ... condensed in style." A striking theme common to both critics is Hawthorne's difference from French literary models. Both saw French fiction, particularly that of George Sand (a woman novelist), as far too immoral in its depiction of issues similar to those treated in *The Scarlet Letter.* Whipple wrote that the novel had "utterly undermined the whole philosophy on which the French novels rest, by seeing further and deeper into the essence both of conventional and moral laws." The terms of the anti-French attitude of those early reviewers, placing Hawthorne's positive insight into convention and morality against the French lack of such insight, is of special significance. It refers inevitably to the historical fact of the 1848 revolution in France and American anxieties about its spread overseas.

This is not to say the positive critical appraisal of Hawthorne's moral representations was unanimous. Arthur Cleveland Coxe, writing in the *Church Review,* considered Hawthorne's novel the story of "the nauseous amour of a Puritan pastor," who commits adultery with "a frail creature of his charge, whose mind is represented as far more debauched than her body." (However one interprets the moral order—or its lack—that Hawthorne describes, very few have considered Hester a "frail creature.")

Henry James's 1874 study, *Hawthorne,* stands as the first "modem" analysis of the novel, insofar as he considered it not as a work of entertainment but one of serious art. James declared that the novel was the "finest piece of imaginative writing yet put forth in the country." Yet he was put off by what he considered an almost ridiculous level of symbolic effect, writing of the scene where the scarlet letter appears in the sky above Boston as one of nearly "physical comedy" rather than high "moral tragedy." Henry James was himself a great author of literary realism, and this preference is shown in his criticism of Hawthorne's symbolism.

Most modem critics have wrangled with *The Scarlet Letter's* unresolved tensions. One of the most insightful, F. O. Matthiessen, describes Hawthorne's method as one of "multiple choice," where different interpretive possibilities are offered by the narrator, who withholds resolution of the reader's inevitable questions. "For Hawthorne," writes Mattheissen, the value of a particular literary moment "consisted in the variety of explanation to which it gave rise." In the climactic final scene where Dimmesdale presumably confesses and exposes the stigmata on ills chest, Hawthorne leaves the reader not only with a variety of options on how the letter got there, but even questions about whether there was a mark *or* confession at all.

Other critics have not been generous with Hawthorne's penchant for mystery. Frederic I. Carpenter, in an essay titled "Scarlet A Minus," calls the book a classic of a "minor order," and complains that "its logic is ambiguous." Carpenter finds the narrative generally characterized by a confusion "between romantic immorality and transcendental idealism." This unresolved tension is most obvious in the character of Hester, who is at once condemned as immoral and glorified as an ideal of courage.

Hester's courage has been the positive subject of criticism by feminist readers, including Nina Baym. Baym wrote a strong and persuasive essay against male critics, particularly of the 1950s, who read the novel as a story primarily about Arthur Dimmesdale. Baym explains the critical subordination of Hester to Dimmesdale as part a masculinist ideology which held that "it would be improper for a woman character to be the protagonist in what might well be the greatest American book." Baym shows that Hester occupies by far the greater part of the novel (including the preface) and that she clearly takes full responsibility for her actions in a way that Dimmesdale does not. In short, "Hester and her behavior are associated with the ideals of passion, self-expression, freedom, and individualism against ideals of order, authority, and restraint—nothing in the plot shows Hester attempting to evade responsibility for her actions."

As Baym suggests, *The Scarlet Letter* is arguably the most important work of fiction ever written in America. Naturally, it gathers enormous critical attention. Important recent works include those by Jonathon Arac, Michael Davitt Bell, and especially, Lauren Berlant and Larry J. Reynolds. These critics are highly various, but generally speaking they have examined the way the novel elaborates—that is, both represented and helped to produce—the powerful symbols and myths of dominant American structures of power. But by far the most influential of recent studies with such an emphasis is Sacvan Bercovitch's *The Office of The Scarlet Letter.*

Bercovitch maintains that the most telling point in the novel is the one sentence paragraph in chapter thirteen where the narrator tells us, "the scarlet letter had not done its office." Here, according to Bercovitch, we learn that the scarlet letter "has a purpose and a goal," thus, "Hawthorne's meanings may be endless, but they are not open-ended." So what is the "goal" of the scarlet letter? To transmute "opposition into complementarity." By this Becovitch means that the letter, in the end, defuses dissent and reestablishes unity: *The Scarlet Letter* "is a story of socialization in which the point of socialization is not to conform, but to consent. Anyone can submit; the socialized believe. It is not enough to have the letter Imposed; you have to do it yourself." The scarlet letter is at first imposed on Hester by the Puritan magistrates, but this does not represent the best form of socialization because Hester does not wear it willingly but bears it as a punishment. An important turning point is the scene in the forest where she discards the letter by the brook, but then, through Pearl's imploring, takes the letter back upon her chest. Also, according to this reading, her planned escape with Pearl

and Dimmesdale from Boston must fail, for leaving would represent an unwillingness to *fully* accept the letter It is clear that the letter has finally accomplished its office when, after eventually going With Pearl to Europe, Hester willingly returns to the community of her shame. As Hawthorne writes in the Conclusion, "She had returned, therefore, and

resumed,—of her own free will, for not the sternest magistrate of that iron period would have imposed it,—resumed the symbol of which we have related so dark a tale." Instead of being a figure of scorn and shame, she becomes a valued counselor in the community, resolving conflict, as opposed to representing it. For Bercovitch this is an allegorical representation of an American method of controlling dissent. "To understand the office of the A ... is to see how culture empowers symbolic form, including forms of dissent, and how symbols participate in the dynamics of culture, including the dynamics of constraint."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

In the following essay, James, a doctoral candidate at Yale University, explores the historical concerns that shaped The Scarlet Letter *and how Hester Prynne's emblem serves as several types of imagery*

Nathaniel Hawthorne envisioned *The Scarlet Letter* as a short story to be published in a collection, but it outgrew that purpose. Most critics accept Hawthorne's definition of it as a "romance," rather than as a novel. It usually appears with an introductory autobiographical essay, "The Custom-House,"_ in which Hawthorne describes working in his ancestral village, Salem, Massachusetts, as a customs officer. Hawthorne describes coming across certain documents in the customs house that provide him with the basis for *The Scarlet Letter.* But this essay fictionalizes the origins of the story in that it offers "proofs of the authenticity of a narrative therein contained." Following other literary examples in early American literature, like Washington Irving's *History of New York,* Hawthorne masks his literary invention by making it seem "historical." He calls his motivation for writing the essay "a desire to put [himself] in [his] true position as editor, or very little more." This editorial positioning indicates his interest in creating a aura of "authenticity" and historical importance for his nar rative.

Not surprisingly, therefore, much criticism of *The Scarlet Letter* focuses on its relation to history. Many critics have investigated the Puritan laws governing adultery and searched for an historical Hester Prynne. Other critics have used clues within the tale to specify its context. For example, when Dimmesdale climbs on the scaffold at midnight, Hester and Pearl have been watching at the governor's deathbed. Charles Ryskamp associates this with the death of Governor Winthrop on March 26, 1649, and notices that celestial disturbances were actually recorded after his death. Similarly, Election Day, on which Dimmesdale's sermon commemorates the inauguration of a new Governor, can be located historically on May 2, 1649. To notice these dates, however, is to notice that Hawthorne takes liberties with them. ("The Minister's Vigil" chapter takes place in "early May," not March, and so on) His role in composing *The Scarlet Letter* far exceeds that of a mere "editor" The tale is an invention, and Hawthorne's use of disparate historical details should be understood not only as significant, but also as symbolic.

Hawthorne's interest in the history of the colonies and his Puritan ancestors was deep and genuine, but complicated. He was interested in not Just documenting, but *creating* an "authentic" past

In "The Custom House" and elsewhere in his writing, Hawthorne imagines an ancestral guilt that he inherits; he takes "shame upon [himself] for their sakes." (One of his ancestors, John Hathorne, ruled for executions during the Salem witch trials.) At still another level, Hawthorne invites the reader to relate *The Scarlet Letter* to contemporary politics of the 1840s. "The past is not dead"— it lives on in the custom-house, and other contemporary political institutions. He Writes *The Scarlet Letter* after having lost his administrative position, as a self-proclaimed "politically dead man." Hawthorne insists

that the nation both enables and impedes the lives of its constituents and the telling of its histories.

In the novel's opening pages, we Walt With the crowd for Hester to emerge from the prison. We overhear snatches of conversation among the women of the crowd, who express little sympathy for Hester and even wish for a harsher sentence. The narrator interrupts these bitter sentiments, which match the prison's "gloomy front,'" and contrasts them with a wild rosebush that blooms by the prison door He hopes this rosebush may serve "to symbolize some sweet moral blossom, that may be found" by the reader of this "tale of human frailty and sorrow.'' Explicitly, then, Hawthorne identifies *The Scarlet Letter* as a moral parable, which offers its readers a "sweet" and "moral" lesson. This lesson emerges from the faults made by the Puritans' early experiment in society, WhiCh the narrator consistently uses irony to deflate. He comments, for example, that "whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness" the founding Pilgrims had envisioned, a cemetery and a prison both became necessary institutions. He aims his irony not at the fact that the need for a prison arose, but at the naive fantasy that it could have been otherwise. As he does in *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), Hawthorne deflates the tradition of American dreams of Utopia and new social orders. In *The Scarlet Letter,* the fault shared by the Puritan settlers, the women outside the prison, and Arthur Dimmesdale most of all, is pious hypocrisy: they naively imagine that sin, or "human frailty and sorrow," can be aVoided through denial and pretense.

Chillingworth, using an assumed name and hiding his intent of revenge, becomes an increasingly diabolical villain by his own duplicity. At the other end of the spectrum, Hester Prynne, because she wears a sign of shame on the surface of her clothing, cannot feign innocence; consequently she has a greater potential for salvation and peace.

For Hawthorne, his Puritan ancestors and the society they built seemed to forget the wisdom of the great Puritan poet John Milton, author of *Paradise Lost.* Hawthorne repeatedly invokes *Paradise Lost* in order to reassert its vision of mankind as fallen, and its poetic dramatization of Adam and Eve's fall and expulsion from Eden. Fallen, with the world "all before them," they gain the potential for ultimate redemption So Hester, let out of prison, "with the world before her," seems to have a better chance of redemption than her hypocritical neighbors.

Hawthorne's allusions to *Paradise Lost* also provide him a way of introducing the question of sexuality and woman as the site of temptation and sin. Hester Prynne repeatedly feels herself to be responsible for the sins of both Dimmesdale and Chillingworth. Dimmesdale and Chillingworth each reinforce this interpretation. The narrator dramatizes the self-serving structure of their accusations, and calls it into question. The irony of Dimmesdale's initial entreaty to Hester illustrates this:

Be not silent from any mistaken pity and tenderness for [thy fellow-sinner]; 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 rude a guilty heart through

life. What can thy silence do for him, except it tempt him—yea, compel him, as it were—to add hypocrisy to sin?

Dimmesdale, as he stands at a literally high place, transfers his own responsibility to acknowledge his part in the crime to Hester. Hester serves both Dimmesdale and Chillingworth, and indeed the whole community, as a scapegoat. The "rich, voluptuous, Oriental characteristic" in her nature, which implies sexuality, is something that the community simultaneously desires and disavows. They ostracize her, but continue to consume her needlework, surreptitiously borrowing from the exotic principle she seems to symbolize.

In this way, Hawthorne directs his irony at Puritan hypocrisy. However, he softens the didacticism (intent to teach) of his tale with the other means he uses imagery and symbolism. Again, the rosebush should *"symbolize* some sweet moral blossom"—the key word is "symbolize" The novel's most important symbol, the eponymous (name-giving) scarlet letter "A," takes on several different meanings. To the townspeople, the letter has "the effect of a spell, taking [Hester] out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and inclosing her in a sphere by herself." The spell of this scarlet letter is akin to that of *The Scarlet Letter-the* book itself. Like the community of Boston, we are invited to enter a separate sphere, where both imagination and moral growth can occur. As Hawthorne describes it in "The Custom House," modem life (of the 1840s) has a dulling effect on the mind and the Spirit. In his fiction, he wants to create a richer and more challenging world. Just as the meaning of Hester's "A" gradually expands for the townspeople, meaning not just "Adultery" but also "Able," and perhaps "Angel," *The Scarlet Letter* has an ambiguity that opens possibilities of meaning for its readers. Readers continue to speculate on what the "A" additionally suggests: Arthur (Dimmesdale), Ambiguity, America, and so on.

The ambiguity of Hester's scarlet letter "A" has been used as a textbook case to Illustrate the difference between two kinds of imagery in Writing: allegory and symbolism. Allegory, in which the name of a character or a thing directly indicates its meaning, can be seen in Hawthorne's early story "Young Goodman Brown," about a young, good man. Symbolism, on the other hand, requires more interpretation; the "A," for instance, suggests many possibilities which are in themselves contradictory ("adultery" versus "angel"). Most Critics understand symbolism as a more sophisticated technique, and see it as more rewarding for the reader, who must enter into the text in order to tease out its possible meanings. In *The Scarlet Letter,* this act of interpretation outside the text mirrors what happens in the story itself.

The narrator of *The Scarlet Letter* continually provides more than one interpretation of events. When the strange light shines in the sky during "The Minister's Vigil," it makes "all visible, but with a singularity of aspect that [seems] to give another moral interpretation to the things of this world than they had ever borne before." The narrator only reports a "light." He suggests that Dimmesdale reads it as a giant "A"—his own secret sin Writ large in the heavens—because of his "highly disordered mental state." But this account is in turn undermined when the sexton and the townsfolk also read a large "A" in the sky, which they "interpret to stand for angel."

These moments suggest that part of the appeal of *The Scarlet Letter* is the act of reading itself. Hawthorne dramatizes the effect of reading most clearly through Pearl. Up until a certain point, she is more a symbol than a character. The narrator comments, as Pearl dances by, "It was the scarlet letter in another form; the scarlet letter endowed with life." But at a particular moment, Pearl ceases to be a symbol, an "it," and becomes human. That moment occurs on the scaffold, when she kisses her father; his grief transforms her, by calling upon "all her sympathies." This moment emblematizes the moral effect that aesthetic philosophers of the nineteenth century believed literature and art could have on their audiences. Hawthorne, by inscribing such a moment, puts forth high aesthetic claims for his work. The fact that Pearl—here the figure for an ideal reader—is *feminine* may suggest that Hawthorne has a feminine audience in mind. O ccasionally, Hawthorne seems to voice a certain anxiety about the fact that aesthetic appreciation is "seldom seen in the masculine character after childhood or early youth," and whether or not writing might have a disturbingly feminizing effect on writers and readers. On the other hand, work as a customs officer poses a threat to "self reliance" and "manly character"—a threat Hawthorne escapes by returning to writing. In any case, the scene of Pearl's transformation, as the text's central moment of redemption and resolution, emphasizes the Importance of the emotions in a richly lived *and* moral life. In this way, Hawthorne seems to bring two opposites together. Pearl, as a younger, virginal version of her mother, neutralizes the threat Hester initially posed. Hawthorne brings the possibility of sensual and feeling feminine character back into the realm of moral life.

Source: Pearl James, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale 1997

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Sewall discusses Hawthorne's introductory essay, and the emphasis on ambiguity throughout The Scarlet Letter.

There is something reminiscent of now familiar processes in Hawthorne's account of the origin and growth of the idea of *The Scarlet Letter* in the introductory essay to the novel, "The Custom House." He tells (albeit whimsically) of finding one day the scarlet letter itself—"that certain affair of fine red cloth"—in his rummagings about the Custom House and of how it, and the old manuscript which told its story, set him to certain somber musings. The old story of a bygone, dire event and its decaying symbol rayed out meanings to his imagination as surely as the ancient myths and legends revealed new meanings to the Greek and Elizabethan dramatists. "Certainly [Hawthorne writes], there was some deep meaning in it, most worthy of interpretation, and which, as it were, streamed forth from the mystic symbol, subtly communicating it to my sensibilities, but evading the analysis of my mind." The "half a dozen sheets of foolscap" of Mr Surveyor Pue's account of the letter, which seemed at first glance to give "a reasonably complete explanation of the whole affair," stood to the novel as (we might hazard) the ancient legend of Oedipus stood to Sophocles, or Holinshed's account of Lear's story to Shakespeare. With mock apology, Hawthorne acknowledged the liberties he took with Pue's document: "I must not be understood as affirming, that, in the dressing up of the tale, and imagining the motives and modes of passion that influenced the characters who figure in It, I have invariably confined myself within the limits of the old Surveyor's half a dozen sheets of foolscap." Meditating upon the simple outlines of Hester's story as the old document recorded it, Hawthorne asked, as it were, the existential questions: What (to Hester) did It mean to be a woman of flesh and blood, caught in that situation of guilt but sanctioned by a kind of inner necessity, the promptings of her own high spirit, which neither she nor her pious lover could repudiate as entirely evil ("What we did had a consecration of its own.")? What did it feel like to live through a dilemma so potent with destructive possibilities? What must have been the impact on a powerful yet sensitive nature? Is there not here, too, a "boundary-situation" sufficient to call m question man's very conception of himself and what he lives by?

Hester's religious heritage and her community pronounced her utterly guilty; she had sinned "in the most sacred quality of human life." She was ostracized, Imprisoned, and put on trial for her life: "This woman [said one of her persecutors] has brought shame upon us all, and ought to me. Is there not a law for it? Truly, there is, both in the scripture and the statute-book." In her extremity, what was she to do? To accept the community's verdict of total guilt would be to renounce the element of "consecration" she knew to be true of her relationship with Dimmesdale; and yet to renounce the community in the name of her consecration was equally unthinkable. She had sinned, and she knew guilt. But hers was no passive nature and, from some mysterious promptings of her own being, she took action in the only way she knew how; in the dim light of her prison cell, she embroidered the scarlet letter—with matchless artistry and in brilliant hue.

That is, she accepted, yet defied. She wore the "A" as the sign of her sin, which she publicly acknowledged—but she wore it on her own terms. Preserving a margin of freedom, she asserted the partial justice of her cause. The letter, when she appeared in public, "had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and enclosing her in a sphere by herself." Facing the Puritan crowd, she could have cursed them—and God—and died, either spiritually, or actually by suicide (she thought of suicide in prison). She could have revealed the name of her lover and got a mitigation of sentence, or prostrated herself in guilt and got the sympathy of the community. Instead, she decided to "maintain her own ways" before the people and *her* Judges—though it slay *her. Her* final answer was to live out *her* dilemma in full acceptance of the suffering in store.

In the penultimate chapter of the novel, as Hawthorne prepares for the climactic revelation of the scarlet letter, he himself sums up the result of his meditations on Surveyor Pue's brief summary. With Hester and Pearl headed for the scaffold to join Dimmesdale, "Old Roger Chillingworth," he writes, "followed, as one intimately connected with the drama of guilt and sorrow in which they had all been actors, and well entitled, therefore, to be present at its closing scene."

It had been the work of the Enlightenment, the Romantics, and (in America) the Transcendentalists, so to shift the perspective on man and his problems as to render needless or meaningless or irrelevant (as they thought) this "drama of guilt and sorrow" which Hawthorne saw in the old story. Emerson was aware of the contrarieties of life and of the soul's struggle, but neither he *nor* his fellow Transcendentalists saw in them the stuff of drama, much less tragic drama It was *for* Hawthorne, who "alone in his time," writes Allen Tate [in *On the Limits of Poetry,* 1948], "kept pure, in the primitive *terms,* the primitive vision," to transmute "the puritan drama of the soul," which for the faithful ended in the New Jerusalem, into tragic drama. The essence of Hester's seven-year course is conflict of Hester WIth *her* self, *her* society, and *her* God. The conflict throughout is fraught with ambiguity, with goods and bads inextricably mixed, and constantly and bItterly recognized as such by Hester. Contrarieties are never resolved, and the issues of the soul's struggles are unsettled either way. "Is not this better," murmured Dimmesdale to Hester after the confession on the scaffold, "than what we dreamed of in the forest?"—to which Hester could only reply: "I know not! I know not!"

This is the sum of Hester's seven years of penance and agonized self-questioning. The Puritan code, which tortured and yet sustained *her,* failed in the end to answer *her* question And in the multiple ambiguities of action and character, in the prevailing "tenebrism" of the novel, in the repeated images of the maze, the labyrinth, the weary and uncertain path, Hawthorne sets (by indirection) the Emersonian promise in a harsh and tragic light. Hester and Dimmesdale had "trusted themselves"; their hearts had "vibrated to that iron string." And it was not entirely wrong, the novel says, that they should have done so But Hawthorne, in the true vein of tragedy, dealt not with doctrinaire injunctions but with actions in their entirety, with special regard, in this instance, *for* their consequences—a phase to which Emerson was singularly blind. These consequences, Hawthorne saw, are never clear, they involve man not only externally as a social being but internally, to his very depths, and they can be dire....

The seven-year action which is precipitated by Hester's Antigone-like independence, or (to the Puritan judges) stubbornness, involved *her* and those whom It touched intimately in deep suffering and loss of irretrievable values. Hester lost *her* youth, her beauty, *her* promise of creativity, and any sure hope she might have had of social or domestic happiness. She lost Dimmesdale, whom a full confession at the outset might have brought to *her* side, and whose life was ultimately ruined anyway She was the cause of Chillingworth's long, destructive, and self-destructive course of revenge. She anguished over Pearl's bleak and bitter childhood

Her own loneliness and isolation, especially for one of so warm and rich a nature, was a constant sorrow and reminder of *her* guilt, a kind of suffering which Antigone or Medea, who in other ways are not unlike *her,* never knew in similar quality or duration And in the end, she knew not whether she had done right or wrong. She goes out of *our* ken, a gray figure (still wearing *her* scarlet letter resumed "of *her* own free will"), and, "wise through dusky grief," giving comfort and counsel to the perplexed or forlorn.

If a major salvage from her experience is this hard-won wisdom of Hester's, it is not the only point of light in the dark world of mysteries and riddles that the novel in general portrays. By her stand Hester asserted her own values against the inherited and inhumane dogma of her community as surely as Prometheus, in Aeschylus' play, asserted his own sense of justice against Zeus In both instances the suffering of the hero "made a difference" Hester humanized the community that would have cast her out, even put her to death. She forced it to reassess its own severe and absolute dogmas, as Antigone forced a reassessment in Thebes, or Hamlet in Ellsinore, or Prometheus on Olympus. She envisioned and in quiet comers whispered of It to those who would hear, a "brighter period. a new truth ... to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness." If Dimmesdale perished because of the ordeal her action plunged him into, it was not before he had achieved a measure of heroic strength and a new insight which in the normal course would never have been his. When he died he was "ready" as he had never been before. At his death Pearl achieved a new humanity: "The great scene of grief in which the wild infant bore a part, had developed all her sympathies; and as her tears fell upon her father's cheek, they were the pledge that she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor forever do battle with the world, but be a woman in It." Hester, Dimmesdale, and now Pearl learned what it is "to be men and women in It" what it means to be.

Dimmesdale in his faith died praising God—a religious death. Hester lived out her "tragic" existence, giving counsel but, "stained with sins, bowed down with shame," denied the prophetic voice she might have raised, still believing, yet not believing (as witness the "A" which she wore to the end) in herself. "After many, many years," she was buried with her lover, and even her burial, like everything else in her life, was ambiguous. She was buried next to Dimmesdale, "yet with a space between, as if the dust of the two sleepers had no right to mingle." No right to mingle? In the first scene of the novel, Hawthorne had said of Hester's judges: "They were, doubtless, good men, just, and sage. But, out of the whole human family, it would not have been easy to select the same number of wise and virtuous persons, who should be less capable of sitting in judgment on an erring woman's heart, and disentangling its mesh of good and

evil." Had Hester's and Dimmesdale's deed a "consecration of Its own," or had it not? The Puritan judges said no. Even Hawthorne, speaking through the novel as a whole, suspends judgment. "We know not we know not." Dimmesdale, the believer, could look forward to the last day "when all hidden things shall be revealed," when "the dark problem of this life" shall be made plain. But in this life he had wandered in a maze, "quite astray and at a loss in the pathway of human existence." So, to a close and scrupulous observer like Hawthorne, it must ever be. The pathway is beset with pitfalls and dubious choices. The shrewd pick their way Warily. The passionate are likely to stumble or go wrong, and "good intentions" have no bearing on the inevitable penalty, which often far exceeds the crime. This is hard, but, to the heroic in heart, no cause for despair. There is wisdom to be won from the fine hammered steel of woe, a flower to be plucked from the rosebush at the prison door "to relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow." To relieve, but not to reverse or redeem

Source: Richard B Sewall, "The Scarlet Letter,", in *The Vision of Tragedy,* new edition, Yale University Press, 1980, pp 86-91

Critical Essay #3

Granger, a professor of English at the University of Oklahoma, maintains that The Scarlet Letter *is not Hester's story but that of Dimmesdale, whose confession bridges the gap between illusion and reality, or the ideal and actuality, thus making him a true tragic hero.*

It is my conviction that, even though Arthur Dimmesdale does not move down center until late in the action, *The Scarlet Letter* is finally his story and, what is more important, that he is a tragic hero. He alone among the major characters never functions symbolically, though he is the familiar figure of Every-Christian. Viewed thus, Hawthorne's allegorical romance centers on a good man's struggle with and eventual victory over the guilt he experiences after committing lechery. Hawthorne is saying that three courses of action are open to such a sinner: he may keep silent and suffer "eternal alienation from the Good and True," the course urged by Roger Chillingworth, or—and this implies that he will probably keep silent all the while—he may flee the scene of the crime and with it his responsibility, the course eventually urged by Hester Prynne; or he may make full and public confession, the course urged by the child Pearl. Having kept silent for more than seven years, Dimmesdale finally has his Calvinist faith put to the supreme test and, having agreed to flee Boston with Hester and their child, finds the strength to face his responsibility and confess before he dies.

Although Dimmesdale respects and, except in one instance, has never broken civil and ecclesiastical law, theocratic authority at Boston is ultimately powerless to bring him to confession. John Wilson and Governor Bellingham, the chief representatives of church and state, are ill-equipped to understand his condition and can only point to the scaffold of the pillory as the place whereon sinners must stand and reveal their sin. Is it any wonder, then, that Dimmesdale should reject their offers of assistance as he prepares to make his revelation? On the other hand, he is intimately connected with the wronged husband, the wife who was his partner in sin, and the natural child born of this sin, each of whom does in fact help him toward this revelation. And yet, were it not for his steady observance of the law, a law whose operations are symbolized by the presence of the prison, pillory, meetinghouse, and governor's hall, he could not have acted responsibly at the last. Hawthorne's Bostonians, while certainly not drawn in an altogether sympathetic light, believe that a sinner can only absolve himself of sin, God willing, by making public confession. Dimmesdale subscribes to this orthodox Calvinist belief, as he does to its corollary that good works without true faith are less than naught. Holding firmly to these beliefs, he knows from the first that nothing short of confession can bring to an end the hypocrisy he has been making of his life. He finally realizes, as Wilson and Bellingham never do, that fallen man in his search for redemption must have his faith tested by undergoing a lonely, dark, spiritual journey before he can discover the way to responsible action. No community, not even God-fearing, seventeenth-century Boston, can instruct its members what road to take. Like Job, like Bunyan's Christian, Dimmesdale feels compelled to make his way alone, realizing that the individual, seeing as the community never can how far his actual self has fallen short of his ideal, must Judge himself and prescribe for his condition.

Dimmesdale began his dark journey after the moment of passion he and Hester shared in the forest. Through all the years before they meet there again, this man, a minister of God who loves the truth and loathes the lie, has known only penance has felt from the outset the endless searing of "his Inmost heart," scourges his body and fasts and keeps long vigils, feels the hypocrisy of his position mount as he stands in the pulpit on the Sabbath and utters vague confessions, and, most painful of all, makes a "mockery of penitence" by attiring himself in his vestments one obscure night in early May and standing falsely revealed in meteor light on the scaffold where Hester was once made to stand WIth the infant Pearl in the bright morning sun. During this long first stage of the Journey Roger Chillingworth, "a chief actor, in the poor minister's interior world," is the principal motivating force in the action; indeed, he continues forceful down to the moment Dimmesdale decides to mount the scaffold in daylight and make public confession. Until Dimmesdale recognizes him as "his bitterest enemy," Chillingworth, ostensibly the friendly physician concerned for the minister's physical well-being, resembles a more familiar kind of "leech," seeking to know what guilt lies buried in his heart and, when this secret is revealed to him, corrupting "his spiritual being" and bringing him to "the verge of lunacy." In short, Chillingworth symbolizes that force within the Christian pilgrim which prompts him to conceal his sin from the world; if ever he abandons himself to this temptation, It will destroy his moral nature and he will die unrepentant.

Brought to the threshold of insanity by this never-ceasing, always secret agony, finding no spiritual relief in the acts of penance he performs, Dimmesdale enters the most critical stage of the journey. Now his faith is to be tested more severely than it has been these seven years and, as a condition of making the journey, under circumstances that are not of his own choosing. In fact, until the second forest meeting his faith has not really been tested; unlike Hester, who has long dwelt on the outskirts of the community and is critical of its institutions, he has "never gone through an experience calculated to lead him beyond the scope of generally received laws; although, in a single instance, he had so fearfully transgressed one of the most sacred of them." The great question now is whether, for all his ministerial "eloquence and religious fervor," he will prove equal to the test. Ever fearful about venturing far from the orthodox way, finding himself in the wild forest once again, he is overwhelmed by the revitalized memory of the sin of passion committed there long ago and experiences a new temptation more terrible than any he has yet known. The beautiful Hester, who has been wandering morally ever Since they sinned together, is now more his enemy than the diabolical Chillingworth Responding to the renewed strength of her love for him, he suffers temporary suspension of the will—will-lessness being a necessary state at this stage of the journey—and calls on her to be his guide: "Think for me, Hester! Thou art strong. Resolve for me!... Advise me what to do." Hester, "fixing her deep eyes on the minister's, and instinctively exercising a magnetic power over a spirit so shattered and subdued, that It could hardly hold itself erect," advises a course of action more unorthodox than that which Chillingworth long ago imposed, though not necessarily inconsistent with it. "Leave this wreck and ruin here where it hath happened!.. Begin all anew!... Exchange tills false life of thine for a true one give up this name of Arthur Dimmesdale, and make thyself another, and a high one, such as thou canst wear without fear or shame." No Christian, certainly not if he be a Calvinist, can deny his past, indeed his very birthright,

and live at peace with himself, but at this moment a will-less Dimmesdale consents to deny his.

At this point in the journey we take hope that the child Pearl, who would have the truth known to the world, will bring her orthodox father to a sense of his responsibility, as she has not been able to bring her transcendental mother. Standing at the brook side, she in effect demands as she has before that he publicly acknowledge the existence of his daughter. Realizing that he will not "go back with us, hand in hand, we three together, into the town" at this time, she runs to the brook and washes off his unwelcome kiss. Dimmesdale must journey on for a time "in a maze" before he feels ready to act in a way that will satisfy Pearl's demand. As he returns to the town he is incited at every step "to do some strange, wild, wicked thing or other".

Hawthorne offers the following explanation for his nightmarish encounters with people in the town: "Tempted by a dream of happiness, he had yielded himself with deliberate choice, as he had never done before, to what he knew was deadly sin. And the infectious poison of that sin had been thus rapidly diffused throughout his moral system." But now an epiphany is at hand. Seated before his unfinished sermon, he is ready and eager to follow the course of action Pearl has long been urging; contrite, he draws back from the state of moral anarchy into which harkening to Hester's advice had momentarily plunged him, and for the first time knows the full meaning of the verse in *Genesis,* "In the image of God made he man." "...flinging the already written pages of the Election Sermon into the fire, he forthwith began another, which he wrote with such an impulsive flow of thought and emotion, that he fancied himself inspired; and only wondered that Heaven should see fit to transmit the grand and solemn music of its oracles through so foul an organ-pipe as he." The man who had long looked down from his pulpit and seen his "flock hungry for the truth, and listening to my words as if a tongue of Pentecost were speaking" has found his tongue at last. Feeling himself that "heaven-ordained apostle" his parishioners long imagined him to be, he is enabled to pen a vision of the "high and glorious destiny for the newly gathered people of the Lord."

Hester's remark on the Election Day that follows, "a new man is beginning to rule over them," has a significance she did not intend and cannot comprehend: at this moment Dimmesdale is just such a man, even though his rule will last only for the time it takes him to deliver his sermon and make his revelation. As he proceeds to the meetinghouse, no longer will-less but surcharged with spiritual energy, she senses that she has lost the magnetic power she exercised over him in the forest. Here in the marketplace it is she who is weak and he who is strong, for in the final stage of the journey he has found his way out of the maze in which she still wanders. Pearl, who had washed off his kiss at the brook, wishes to "run to him, and bid him kiss me now, before all the people.. ." Knowing at last what It means to be a special instrument of God, .

Dimmesdale gives tongue to his prophecy; "never had man spoken in so wise, so high, and so holy a spirit, as he that spake this day... " Then, mounting the scaffold, supported by Hester and holding Pearl's hand and followed by Chillingworth, he confesses his sin and, stepping forth unassisted, reveals the stigma on his breast. Whereupon Pearl,

having heard her father acknowledge her existence, kisses him willingly in his dying hour.

Arthur Dimmesdale is a tragic hero. Tragedy as I here conceive it arises from the tension between illusion and reality—illusion meaning the there and then, reality the here and now; Illusion meaning the ideal and reality the actual conception one has of himself. The quality of the illusion matters greatly, the noblest being man's aspiration to free himself from his particular time and place; the aspiration, in Christian terms, to return to that state of bliss in which he existed before the Fall. But here a dilemma arises: all men require illusion to bring order out of the chaos of the present, but if a man persists in hiding behind his illusion he is incapacitated for meaningful action. Ethically meaningful, that is to say tragic, action is possible only when a man, guided by this noblest of illusions,

steps out from behind it and, fronting the terrors of the here and now, acts in obedience to a secret impulse of his character. Whereas Dimmesdale's full revelation on the scaffold is tragic, Hester's dynamic but lawless behavior in the forest is at best heroically pathetic. Hester is incapable of acting in a way that is ethically meaningful. Like Dimmesdale she dreams of regaining paradise, but unlike him she finds she must forever hide behind this dream if she is to go on living. In suggesting that they three, Dimmesdale, Pearl, and she herself, exchange the New World for the Old, she seeks to fulfill a temporalized version of tire Edenic illusion, Boston signifying the here and now, Europe the there and then. However noble this illusion, it provides no basis for ethically meaningful action, since she is incapable of stepping from behind it and facing the present circumstance. When Pearl demands that she fasten the letter on her bosom again and Hester, having experienced temporary freedom, does so, it is with a heavy heart. "Hopefully, but a moment ago, as Hester had spoken of drowning it in the deep sea, there was a sense of inevitable doom upon her, as she thus received back this deadly symbol from the hand of fate. She had flung it into infinite space!—she had drawn an hour's free breath!—and here again was tire scarlet misery, glittering on the old spot!" Her advising them to flee Boston was irresponsible because she did not gauge the actual situation accurately and, being irresponsible, it was not ethically meaningful. Nowhere in the narrative does her transcendental morality lead to tragic action. Strong she may seem' tragic she is not.

Conversely, Dimmesdale's confession is the act of a man who is tragically great. Of course, he shares in Hester's hour of transcendental freedom. Once resolved to leave Boston with Hester and their child, he is overcome by a new sensation "It was the exhilarating effect—upon a prisoner just escaped from the dungeon of his own heart—of breathing the wild, free atmosphere of an unredeemed, unchristianized, lawless region." What saves him in the end from the self-deception that incapacitates Hester is the fact that his version of the Edenic illusion is grounded in the infinite, not in the finite world; the fact that, except for the short time he is required to wander in a maze, he knows himself to be a sinner and never mistakes penance done on earth for penitence. Like all men tragically great he sees With unflinching honesty the distance separating his ideal from his actual self and, seeing this, tries to bridge the gap. Before his hour of freedom he tells Hester, "I have laughed, in bitterness and agony of heart, at the contrast

between what I seem and what I am!" Like Young Goodman Brown, he gains insight in this critical hour. "Another man," writes Hawthorne, "had returned out of the forest; a wiser one; With a knowledge of hidden mysteries which the simplicity of the former never could have reached A bitter kind of knowledge that!" Unlike Brown because now secure in his faith, he translates insight into meaningful action, prophesying a glorious destiny for Massachusetts and publicly repenting him of his sin. Whereas Hester believes that what they did had a consecration of its own and seeks assurance that they will be united in paradise, he must tell her in his dying breath: "The law we broke!—the sin here so awfully revealed!—let these alone be in thy thoughts! I fear! I fear! It may be, that, 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. God knows; and He is merciful!" Dimmesdale goes to his early grave humbled and penitent, but when Hester follows him to hers many years later she is apparently unrepentant still. Hawthorne tells us that although "one tombstone served for both," there was "a space between, as if the dust of the two sleepers had no right to mingle."

Source: Bruce Ingham Granger, "Arthur Dimmesdale as Tragic Hero,", in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction,* Vol 19, No. 2, September, 1964, pp 197-203.

Adaptations

The Scarlet Letter has received several film adaptations beginning with director Victor Seastrom's 1926 silent version starring Lillian Gish as Hester Prynne. The first talkie version, directed by Robert Vignola in 1934 (produced by London Films) and starring Colleen Moore, is available from Nostalgia Family Video, though it is prob ably difficult to locate a rental copy.

Recent film productions include a 1973 international version directed by Wim Wenders that received good reviews (Ingram International Films; in German with English subtitles). PBS aired a four-hour version in 1979 that stars Meg Foster as Hester and John Heard as Dimmesdale. Rick Harser's direction is faithful to the novel (PBS Home Video; four video cassettes). A similar educational version was produced in 1991 and is available from Films for the Humanities and Sciences.

One of the great flops of recent years is the 1995 Hollywood production directed by Roland Joffe and starring Demi Moore as Hester, Gary Oldman as Dimmesdale and Robert Duvall as Chillingworth (available from Hollywood Pictures Home Video). Be careful not to embarrass yourself by relying on this film as a guide to the novel.

There are also a number of sound recordings of the novel. Audio Partners Inc. (of Auburn, CA) published an abridged version in 1986 read by Michael Learned (the full tItle is *Michael Learned reads The Scarlet Letter)* The Brilliance Corporation produced an unabridged version read by Dick Hill in 1993 (8 hours) Books in Motion also published an unabridged version in 1982 read by Gene Engene (7.5 hours).

Finally, there are two audio study guides or discussions of *The Scarlet Letter.* Lecturer Robert H Fossum discusses the book on one 38 minute cassette in the series "19th Century American Writers," produced by Everett/Edwards (1976). Time Warner Audio-books published a study guide narrated by Julie Amato in 1994 on one 72 minute cassette.

Topics for Further Study

Research the role of Hawthorne's relative, John Hathorne, in the Salem witch trials and discuss how this influences your interpretation of the novel.

Read a work by one of Hawthorne's transcendentalist contemporaries (like Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature,* or Henry David Thoreau's *Walden)* and compare what you think to be their world view with that of Hawthorne's.

Investigate the idea of crime *and/or* the role of women in colonial New England and compare your findings with Hawthorne's representation of Hester. You might want to consider what the Puritans feared that would justify their particular laws and actions.

Look at some histories of the European revolutions of 1848 and consider why they may have caused Hawthorne some anxiety.

Compare and Contrast

1640s: The Puritans believed in their mission to establish a model community for the Protestant world.

1850s: America had developed an ideology of "manifest destiny" that held that the prosperous expansion of Americans across the continent was inevitable and ordained, and implied that the country was destined to become a great global power.

Today: America's global power seems both assured with the splitting of the Soviet Union, and a thing of the past with the rise of countries like Japan and Germany to economic power.

1640s: The colonists, though not clearly provoked, fought with the Narraganset Indians against the Pequot Indians, at one point killing seven hundred Pequot men, women, and Children.

1850s: Native land claims had all but been eliminated east of the Mississippi with President Jackson's removal of the "five civilized tribes" in the late 1830s. Their bitter march to Oklahoma is known as "The Trail of Tears."

Today: Native peoples survive and grow in geographically dispersed areas and continue to fight legal battles over land claims.

1640s: Anne Hutchinson had recently disturbed the Massachusetts Bay Colony by asserting that inward knowledge of the Holy Spirit, not outward good works, led to salvation.

1850s: Transcendentalists disturbed orthodox religious views by claiming that God and the knowledge of his laws could be experienced by the individual open to revelation.

Today: While religious fundamentalism is riSing and many others are skeptical of religious belief, the idea that God is present in Nature, or the individual, remains popular.

1640s: Women were rigidly excluded from official positions of political or religious power.

1850s: The women's suffrage movement gained strength after the first women's rights convention took place in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. The two principal issues were ownership of property and voting rights.

Today: After gaining the right to vote in 1920, women now hold political offices from mayor to senator to governor. While women have made gains in the business world, they are still underrepresented in executive positions and still encounter discrimination.

What Do I Read Next?

The House of the Seven Gables (1851), Hawthorne's third novel, which he personally thought was a better piece of work than *The Scarlet Letter,* about the cursed house of the Pyncheon family where the sins of fathers are passed on to their descendants.

The Bird Artist, Howard Norman's recent (1994) novel about an artist in a small Newfoundland coastal village, is a story of crime and adultery in a place without the religious authority of Hawthorne's Boston.

The Devil in the Shape of a Woman- Witchcraft in Colonial New England (1987) by Carol F. Karlsen shows that the violent Salem witch trials were not only directed primarily at women, but particularly women who stood to inherit property and, thus, power.

William Cronon's *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England,* (1983) is a seminal work of environmental history that describes the impact the early settlers had on New England native peoples and the environment.

Life in the Iron Mills (1861) by Rebecca Harding Davis is the powerful story of the physical and emotional oppression and struggle of a mid-nineteenth-century mill-worker. Published about a decade after Hawthorne's novel, it is even more of an anomaly in the context of literary transcendentalism

Henry David Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" (1849) was originally titled "Resistance to Civil Government." He argues here for the right of the individual to refuse to pay taxes or otherwise support civil authority against his or her conscience. Thoreau spent some time in jail when he did not pay taxes in 1843 in protest of the Mexican War.

Harriet A. Jacobs's 1861 *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is a kind of "romance" slave narrative that ties sexuality to race in pre-Civil War America.

Further Study

Lauren Gail Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy. Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life,* University of Chicago Press, 1991

A discussion of the connections between *The Scarlet Letter* and the politics and political character of the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, including the concept of utopia as it was applied to

American democracy.

Richard H. Brodhead, *The School of Hawthorne,* Oxford University Press, 1986.

Explores the critical reputation of Hawthorne and how the prevailing literary thought of the day helped create a "school" around his work that led to his inclusion in the literary canon A good history of

Hawthorne's critical reputation.

Critical Essays on Hawthorne's 'The Scarlet Letter', edited by David B. Kesterson, G K Hall, 1988.

A collection of previously published criticism on Hawthorne's novel .

Critical Response to Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'The Scarlet Letter,' edited by Gary Scharnhorst, Greenwood Press, 1992.

Another collection of Critical essays by several critics on the novel.

Louise A DeSalvo, *Nathaniel Hawthorne,* Harvester Press, 1987.

A feminist analysis of Hawthorne's work which decries the misogyny in his texts.

Kenneth Marc Hams, *Hypocrisy and Self-deception in Hawthorne's Fiction,* University Press of Virginia, 1988.

A study which focuses on Hawthorne's preoccupation with hypocrisy, relating it to the author's fascination with the Puritans.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'The Scarlet Letter' edited and with an introduction by Harold Bloom, Chelsea House Publishers, 1986.

An edition of the novel that contains a helpful introduction by a noted literary critic.

New Essays on 'The Scarlet Letter,' edited by Michael J. Colacurcio, Cambridge University Press, 1985.

A collection of original critical assessments of Hawthorne's novel.

Leland S. Person, *Aesthetic Headaches: Women and a Masculine Poetics in Poe, Melville, and Hawthorne,* University of Georgia Press, 1988.

Person's analysis of these authors' difficulties in creating artistic depictions of female characters suggests the need for a "masculine poetics." Devotes a whole chapter to *The Scarlet Letter.*

Larry J Reynolds, "The Scarlet Letter and Revolutions Abroad," *American Literature,* Vol. 77, 1985, pp. 44-67.

Reynolds shows how Hawthorne viewed and was influenced by the European revolutions that began 10 1848.

Alfred F. Rosa, *Salem, Transcendentalism, and Hawthorne,* Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1980.

A study of several of Hawthorne's historical influences, including the witch trials in Massachusetts and the new Transcendentalist school of religious thought.

Charles Ryskamp, "The New England Sources of *The Scarlet Letter," American Literature* XXXI, November 1959, pp. 257-272.

A look at some of the historical events that may have inspired the plot and writing of Hawthorne's novel.

Charles Swann, *Nathaniel Hawthorne, Tradition and Revolution,* Cambridge University Press, 1991.

A literary analysis of Hawthorne's work that offers much historical background which can be applied to several readings of the author's work

Margaret Olofson Thickstun, *Fictions of the Feminine. Puritan Doctrine and the Representation of Women* Cornell University Press, 1988.

An excellent summary of how Puritan Views of women have influenced literary works such as *The Scarlet Letter.*

Twentieth Century Interpretations of 'The Scarlet Letter', A Collection of Critical Essays, edited by John C. Gerber, Prentice-Hall, 1968.

A collection of Important and groundbreaking essays on Hawthorne's novel which discuss the novel's structure and themes and Hawthorne's technique and sources Includes bibliography.

Bibliography

Nma Baym, "Plot m Hawthorne's Romances,"' *Ruined Eden of the Present,* edited by G R Thompson and Virgil L. Lokke, Purdue University Press, 1981, pp. 49-70.

Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Office of the Scarlet Letter,* Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991.

Frederic 1. Carpenter, "Scarlet A Minus,"' *College English,* Vol. 5, 1944, pp. 173-80.

Arthur Cleveland Coxe, "The Writings of Hawthorne,"' *Church Review,* January, 1851, pp. 489-511.

Evert A Duyckinck, Review in *Literary World,* March 30, 1850, pp 323-25.

Henry James, *Hawthorne,* Macmillan & Co, London, 1879.

F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression* in *the Age of Emerson and Whitman,* Oxford University Press, 1941.

Edwin Percy Whipple, Review in *Graham's Magazine,* May, 1850, pp. 345-46.

BOOKRAGS

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Novels for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

©1997-2002; ©2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc.

Gale and Design® and Thomson Learning™ are trademarks used herein under license.

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.
No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any

BOOKRAGS

form or by any means—graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution or information storage retrieval systems—without the written permission of the publisher.

For permission to use material from this product, submit your request via Web at http://www.gale-edit.com/permissions, or you may download our Permissions Request form and submit your request by fax or mail to:

Permissions Department
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535

Permissions Hotline:
248-699-8006 or 800-877-4253, ext. 8006
Fax: 248-699-8074 or 800-762-4058

Since this page cannot legibly accommodate all copyright notices, the acknowledgments constitute an extension of the copyright notice.

While every effort has been made to secure permission to reprint material and to ensure the reliability of the information presented in this publication, The Gale Group, Inc. does not guarantee the accuracy of the data contained herein. The Gale Group, Inc. accepts no payment for listing; and inclusion in the publication of any organization, agency, institution, publication, service, or individual does not imply endorsement of the editors or publisher. Errors brought to the attention of the publisher and verified to the satisfaction of the publisher will be corrected in future editions.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". © 1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". © 1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of classic novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board memberseducational professionals helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

BOOKRAGS

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an at-a-glance comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature, a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

Night. Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the Criticism subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on Winesburg, Ohio. Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition, Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. Richard Wright: Wearing the Mask, in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Novels for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535