

Masterprose

THE SCARLET LETTER
Nathaniel Hawthorne

Masterprose

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Contemporary Classics

C O N T E N T S

Left Pocket: Teacher Resources

Q-Note

- Biographical information
- Plot synopsis
- Stylistic analysis
- Author picture

Guidon

- Glossary of helpful literary terms
- Chapter-by-chapter or scene-by-scene study questions and responses
- Comprehensive discussion questions and responses
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- Teacher copies of reproducible activities and essay tests

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Right Pocket: Reproducible Tests & Activities

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- Activity tracing plot developments

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- Analysis of character or plot evolution

Response Key

Study Questions

- Reproducible study questions from the Guidon with space for students to respond



THE SCARLET LETTER

BIOGRAM The Man

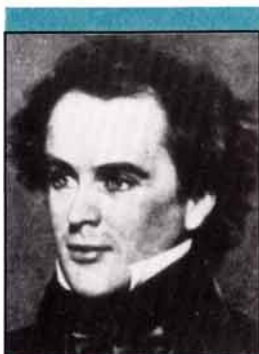
Born in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1804, Nathaniel Hawthorne was the son of a sea captain and the great-grandson of a judge who had presided at the Puritan witchcraft trials in the 1600s. His childhood, though not unhappy, was impoverished because of his father's death in 1808. Rather than resenting his poverty and his tendency towards poor health, Hawthorne learned from them. He developed a vast understanding of human nature and the suffering engendered by social, religious, and economic inequities.

Following graduation from Bowdoin College in 1825, Hawthorne devoted himself to his craft, reading all that he could and writing in his journals as well as for publication. To supplement his income, Hawthorne was forced to interrupt his writing to work at other jobs. Though his work usually involved editing or writing, he did hold a position as a Customs House official in Salem from 1846 to 1849. He later served as an American Consul in England from 1853 to 1857.

A private man, Hawthorne preferred to spend his time secluded with his family and a few close friends. He did, however, participate in the Brook Farm experiment, but found it unsuited to his temperament. Hawthorne and his wife, Sophia, lived for a time at Old Manse in Concord but moved in 1846 to Hawthorne's native Salem, where he finished *The Scarlet Letter*. Six years later, they returned to Concord and settled at The Wayside. After Hawthorne's consulship, they returned to The Wayside, where they remained until Hawthorne's death in 1864.

The Philosopher

Raised in a family and a culture steeped in Puritanism, Hawthorne witnessed the decay of Puritanism with ambivalence. Though immensely critical of Puritanism, he possessed a profound belief in man's obligation to seek the highest truth and a strong moral sense which was deeply embedded in all aspects of his life.



Nathaniel
Hawthorne

He not only read and wrote about the needs for social reform, but also participated directly in at least one experiment in social reform as a member of the utopian socialist colony at Brook Farm.

Appalled by moral decay and human suffering, Hawthorne used his writing to explore the inner workings of the human mind, spirit, and heart. He was convinced that the rigidity of Puritanism and its emphasis on original sin undermined rather than strengthened morality. This belief surfaces frequently in his writing.

The Technician

Hawthorne, a Romantic, wrote to enlighten as well as to entertain his readers. His style, largely allegorical, employs characters and plot to achieve a unified effect and to illustrate a moral lesson.

Romance, according to Hawthorne, owes no great allegiance to history or reality. It is concerned with truth. The writer of romances can, therefore, manipulate his/her characters and atmospheric medium to elevate good and to illuminate the horrors of evil. Though Romance need not reflect reality, if it is to succeed, it must be true to human sentiments, containing within itself the seeds of human emotion. It is precisely this ability to probe the depths of the human mind and spirit that serves Hawthorne so well in his quest for truth in *The Scarlet Letter*.

Other works by Hawthorne include *Our Old Home* (1836), *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846), *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851),

The Blithedale Romance (1852), *The Marble Faun* (1860), a collection of short pieces published in *Twice-Told Tales* (1837), and several other prose pieces.

STYLISTIC DEVICES *The Scarlet Letter* as Allegory

The principal action of *The Scarlet Letter* occurs in the Boston of the 1640s, a somber, gray, violently moral community founded as a kind of Puritan utopia. Into this world, Hawthorne brings Hester Prynne, a young woman amply endowed with beauty and passion, who wears upon her chest the letter A. But it is the A and not its wearer that is important, for *The Scarlet Letter* is an allegory. Its lesson takes precedence over character and plot.

At the story's core is a moral issue involving the virtue of truth and the evil of secret sin, a prevalent theme in Hawthorne's writing. A moral equation is established: Secret sin leads to guilt, which leads to shame. Because Chillingworth and Dimmesdale conceal the truth, both suffer more than Hester, whose sin is already known. Chillingworth's obsessive drive for revenge transforms him into a fiend. Dimmesdale's shame causes him to deteriorate physically as well as spiritually. Neither can hope for redemption or peace. Only Hester, who has confessed, will survive. Through honesty and forbearance, she has achieved a greater strength of character and a truer moral sense. Hester's survival is by no means accidental, for Hawthorne makes no secret of his purpose as a writer. He intends to instruct, to convey some deep lesson.

The Scarlet Letter's lesson is clearly stated: "Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!"

Symbolism

To achieve a single concentrated effect, Hawthorne depends heavily on symbolism and a tightly controlled light/dark motif. The most obvious symbol in the novel is the letter A, to



THE SCARLET LETTER

A SHORT GLOSSARY OF LITERARY TERMS

Some of the terms listed here may be useful in discussion of this literary work.

THE NOVEL is a long prose fiction which represents humans in significant action in their world.

THEME is an observation of life which serves as the controlling idea in a literary work. A theme is seldom presented word-for-word but is more often found as an abstract idea, surfacing through the actions and dialogues of characters, the use of symbols and recurring images, or the manipulation of other literary devices.

SYMBOLISM is an economic method for exploring the unknown through the known. A familiar object is used to represent the unfamiliar. The substitution demands that the reader transfer the relevant characteristics of the known to the unknown.

PLOT is the progression of events in a literary work. Each part of the plot is so essential that if one part were removed, the whole structure would be disturbed.

CHARACTERIZATION is the creation of believable fictitious personalities. The basic methods of characterization include these:

- 1) an explicit statement by the author
- 2) the character's appearance
- 3) the aspects of setting which reflect influence of the character
- 4) the character's actions, including mannerisms
- 5) reactions of and to the character
- 6) the character's thoughts
- 7) what the character says
- 8) what others say about the character

CONFLICT results from the struggle of two opposing forces. One of the forces is usually a person. That person usually confronts one or more of five basic kinds of opposition. Opposition includes other people, forces of nature, society, fate, and internal elements battling for control.

SETTING is the time and place of a narrative. The physical aspects of setting include time of day or other particulars of the environment, such as location, topography, and the placement of objects. The intangibles of setting include lifestyle and the predominant spiritual or moral atmosphere.



GUIDON STUDY QUESTIONS

1. *How are the Puritans of Boston first portrayed?*

Darkness pervades Boston and its residents. The Puritans are described as solemn, severe, and sturdy, clothed in gray, brown, and black. Everything about them bespeaks a certain righteousness.

2. *What is significant about the rosebush outside the prison door?*

The rose is a symbol of such importance that Hawthorne explains its significance directly to the reader. Its tender red beauty, contrasting sharply with the grim surroundings, symbolizes the sweet moral of his tale and offers relief from sorrow. Standing as a token of hope, the rose also serves to foreshadow anguish, to introduce Hester, and to connect her to Anne Hutchinson, another exceptional woman martyred by the Puritans.

3. *Describe Hester's demeanor as she emerges from her prison cell.*

Standing tall and womanly, Hester appears beautiful rather than anguished. As she walks past the townspeople, she is calm. On the scaffold she remains firm in her refusal to name the father of her child. Although outwardly Hester is haughty, unrepentant, and cold, her indifference masks shame, passion, and anguish.

4. *Is there a significance to Hester's viewing the crowd from atop the scaffold?*

From her position above the market place, Hester is able to look directly into the eyes of the magistrates, down upon the crowd, and within herself. Her ignominy isolates her from society and enables her to view it objectively — perhaps for the first time. She can expect no understanding from the church elders, no great sympathy from the crowd, and no comfort from her family or friends.

5. *Describe Roger Chillingworth in the scene in which he visits Hester in jail.*

Chillingworth, a physician, appears calm and ministers to Hester and her child dispassionately. Having attended to their physical needs, Chillingworth addresses the injury done him by Hester's unfaithfulness. His demeanor and speech reveal a mysterious and dark nature, mirrored in his twisted frame.

6. *Why does Chillingworth ask Hester to keep his identity a secret?*

Being new in Boston, Chillingworth claims he wishes to be free of the shame which would accompany any connection with Hester. An unsullied reputation would also allow him to search for Hester's lover without arousing suspicion.

7. *Why does Hester remain in Boston?*

Although free to leave Boston, Hester feels bound by shame to the place where she sinned. Fleeing would not erase the sin. Hester is also spiritually and emotionally bound to her lover, who is still in Boston.

8. *How does Hester support herself and her daughter?*

Using her needlework talent, Hester designs clothing for Boston's most influential citizens. From her commissions, she saves enough to provide the essentials for herself and her daughter. The bulk of what she earns, however, goes to the poor and the needy.

9. *How is Hester treated by the townspeople?*

As she walks through Boston, Hester is subjected to stares and insults. Even in church she is singled out as an example of sinfulness. Nowhere is she welcomed with a smile or a kind word. The scarlet letter isolates her from all affection.

10. *Why does Hester name her daughter Pearl?*

Taken from the Bible, the name Pearl expresses Hester's conflicting feelings toward her daughter. Pearl is the price Hester has paid for sinning and the treasure which makes her dishonor tolerable.

11. *How is Pearl first described?*

Pearl appears more imp than child. Pretty, healthy, and lively, she sports brilliant clothes which express her passionate nature. At home in nature, she exists outside the Puritan code of behavior. In a sense the scarlet letter is the shadow in which she lives.


12. *How is Pearl treated by the children of Boston?*

Whether imitating their parents' scorn of Hester or instinctively sensing a difference between Pearl and themselves, the children taunt Pearl relentlessly. None comes forward to befriend her. Like her mother, Pearl exists outside society.

believe that his confession and the A upon his chest were the result of his great compassion for the suffering of others. A few believe the A and Dimmesdale's strange behavior resulted from the evil influence of Chillingworth, and some deny having seen the A at all.

50. *What becomes of Hester and Pearl?*

Soon after Dimmesdale's death, Hester and Pearl disappear. Most believe the two went abroad. Years later, Hester returns, resuming the A and her charitable works. No explanation is offered for her absence, but gifts and letters from abroad suggest that her little Pearl has married and become a lady of wealth and stature.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

I. An Examination of Character

1. *Describe and characterize Hester as she first appears in the novel.*

The Hester who emerges from the Boston jailhouse is young, beautiful, and dignified, almost to the point of haughtiness. Standing tall and clutching her infant daughter, Hester appears indifferent to the hostile eyes of the righteous townspeople. Beneath her calm demeanor, however, lies a passionate nature which suffers greatly from her shame. Once on the scaffold, Hester is buoyed only by her fierce determination to protect the name of her child's father. This loyalty sustains her, yet it also isolates her from redemption. Hester is alone.

2. *How is Hester changed by the seven years which elapse before her final stand on the scaffold?*

The burden of the scarlet letter has preyed heavily on Hester's spirit but not, perhaps, in the way that had been intended. In her solitude, Hester has been freed from the limitations imposed by strict adherence to the Puritan creed. She is able to view human frailty with compassion. She realizes that her sin is not unique nor is it as vile as that of Chillingworth.

Through her self-imposed actions as a Sister of Mercy, Hester has become understanding and forgiving, able to approach life with affection. She has also learned to sacrifice her own comfort for that of others, even at the risk of being hurt. These changes have not gone unnoticed. The townspeople have come to believe that the A stands for Able. Even Chillingworth is forced to admit that there is more good in Hester than in himself. Hester has become a better person.

3. *What effect has the seven-year interval had on Dimmesdale?*

Believed to be a saint, Dimmesdale is much loved by the townspeople, yet their love only increases his guilt and sense of shame. Unable to step forward and confess, Dimmesdale is forced to repent privately. Fasts, prayers, even scourging, provide no relief from his suffering. As he wastes away spiritually, his physical health deteriorates as well. Weakened by guilt and the sinister presence of Chillingworth, Dimmesdale is without physical or moral strength. Only through Hester's support is Dimmesdale able to overcome his hopelessness and confess.

4. *Why does Chillingworth persist in his punishment of Dimmesdale even after he realizes he is destroying himself?*

Confronted by Hester, Chillingworth is forced to examine his motives for swearing Hester to secrecy and for seeking the name of Pearl's father. Initially, he wished only to bring Hester's lover to justice, but his quest has become an obsession. Driven by the desire to punish the man who dishonored Hester and himself, Chillingworth delves into the spiritual recesses of Dimmesdale's being. In doing so, Chillingworth is transformed into a fiend. The realization that he has become a sinister agent of darkness only goads Chillingworth on, for he holds Dimmesdale, and, to a lesser extent, Hester, responsible for his horrid transformation.

II. An Examination of Symbolism

1. *List the various meanings attached to the scarlet letter.*

The fact that nearly every page carries some reference to the A is by no means accidental, nor is it carelessness which attaches so many different meanings to the letter. The scarlet token is both symbol and reality, burden and salvation; it binds and isolates. The A, perhaps, represents all of humanity.

Though it is never directly stated, the A is meant to present Hester to the world as an adulteress. To Hester, however, the scarlet and gilt letter is more than a label. Isolating her from humanity, it erases any hope for affection. Even Pearl, Hester's only treasure, exists in the shadow of the A. Touching the A and questioning its meaning, Pearl becomes an extension of the letter, defining herself and her mother by the token.

Seen in the sky, the A illuminates Hester on the scaffold with her child and Dimmesdale. Later it

40. petulant
- fickle
 - peevish
 - sad
 - triumphant
41. cadence
- rhythm
 - anxiety
 - site
 - noise
42. to mollify
- to arbitrate
 - to embarrass
 - to soften
 - to arrange
43. to vex
- to call
 - to observe
 - to return
 - to annoy
44. to requite
- to repeal
 - to relent
 - to repay
 - to renew
45. probity
- honesty
 - nearness
 - sarcasm
 - innocence
46. mien
- manner
 - intention
 - cruelty
 - beauty
47. fortitude
- ability
 - courage
 - weakness
 - belief
48. auditor
- gauge
 - meter
 - mirror
 - listener
49. venerable
- respected
 - weak
 - cheerful
 - smooth
50. necromancer
- cannibal
 - sorcerer
 - legislator
 - mourner



STUDENT ENRICHMENT ACTIVITIES

Research

- Read Cotton Mather's essay, "The Life of John Winthrop, Esq., Governor of the Massachusetts Colony" from **Magnalia Christi Americana**, Chapter IV. Extract those qualities thought most noble in a Puritan. How do the citizens of Hawthorne's Boston measure up to these standards?
- Read Jonathan Edwards' essay, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Assuming that Edwards' rhetoric expresses the sentiments of devout Puritans, characterize the Puritan attitudes toward God, damnation, and salvation.
- Read Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown." How does this portrait of Puritanism compare with that in **The Scarlet Letter**?
- Read Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery." Compare the treatment of the protagonist by the townspeople with the treatment Hester suffers from the Puritans.
- Our Constitution is founded on the separation of church and state. How were first amendment rights interpreted by the Puritans? How are they construed today? Cite examples to support your thesis.
- How do your impressions of Puritanism gained from other sources such as history books compare with the picture presented in **The Scarlet Letter**?
- Find out who Anne Hutchinson was and write a brief biographical sketch of her life. Then decide, based on your research, whether any similarity exists between Anne and Hester as is suggested in the novel.

Imagination

- Rewrite the final chapters of **The Scarlet Letter**

Masterprose Study Questions

1. How are the Puritans of Boston first portrayed?
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4. Is there a significance to Hester's viewing the crowd from atop the scaffold?
5. Describe Roger Chillingworth in the scene in which he visits Hester in jail.
6. Why does Chillingworth ask Hester to keep his identity a secret?
7. Why does Hester remain in Boston?
8. How does Hester support herself and her daughter?
9. How is Hester treated by the townspeople?

Reproducible

THE SCARLET LETTER

Choose the letter of the word or phrase that comes closest to the meaning of the main word.

- | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|
| 1. to petrify
a. to make sick
b. to make hard
c. to make angry
d. to make trouble | 7. fervor
a. anger
b. zeal
c. wound
d. humor | 13. to concoct
a. to heal
b. to confine
c. to devise
d. to share | 19. enmity
a. indifference
b. envy
c. dislike
d. regret |
| 2. transgressor
a. official
b. writer
c. victim
d. sinner | 8. to exhort
a. to incite
b. to promise
c. to play
d. to steal | 14. insidious
a. ridiculous
b. unsure
c. treacherous
d. isolated | 20. preternatural
a. strange
b. average
c. evil
d. saintly |
| 3. purport
a. meaning
b. accusation
c. fortress
d. denial | 9. efficacy
a. meaninglessness
b. faithfulness
c. effectiveness
d. playfulness | 15. inopportune
a. magical
b. inconvenient
c. favorable
d. greedy | 21. to caper
a. to plot
b. to skip
c. to hide
d. to stumble |
| 4. visage
a. object
b. eyesight
c. dream
d. face | 10. retribution
a. punishment
b. gift
c. dream
d. assignment | 16. to procure
a. to borrow
b. to steal
c. to inherit
d. to obtain | 22. extant
a. enormous
b. ancient
c. outstanding
d. existing |
| 5. iniquity
a. landscape
b. strangeness
c. wickedness
d. carelessness | 11. progenitors
a. forecasters
b. intellectuals
c. forefathers
d. followers | 17. attire
a. decoration
b. achievement
c. clothing
d. treasure | 23. pestilence
a. plague
b. pretense
c. device
d. comfort |
| 6. to rankle
a. to bake
b. to peddle
c. to irritate
d. to mimic | 12. emolument
a. balm
b. lubricant
c. income
d. praise | 18. to revile
a. to change
b. to spend
c. to join
d. to scold | 24. vista
a. variety
b. value
c. view
d. vine |

Reproducible

THE SCARLET LETTER

MATCHING *Match each character with the proper description.*

- | | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| ___ 1. Ann Hutchison | a. Hester made a pair of gloves for him |
| ___ 2. Master Brackett | b. witch-lady |
| ___ 3. Isaac Johnson | c. first settler on the peninsula |
| ___ 4. Jonathan Pue | d. he died the night the A shone in the sky |
| ___ 5. Increase Mather | e. founder of a religious sect |
| ___ 6. Mr. Wilson | f. the eldest clergyman in Boston |
| ___ 7. Governor Bellingham | g. the jailer |
| ___ 8. Reverend Mr. Blackstone | h. surveyor for the port of Salem |
| ___ 9. Governor Winthrop | i. first person buried in Boston cemetery |
| ___ 10. Mistress Hibbins | j. a young and distinguished divine |

TRUE-FALSE *Mark each statement either true or false.*

- ___ 11. The penalty for adultery in Puritan Boston is death.
- ___ 12. Pearl often kisses the scarlet letter to upset her mother.
- ___ 13. Chillingworth begs Hester to keep his secret.
- ___ 14. Pearl plays well with the other children in the village.
- ___ 15. Chillingworth tries to poison Dimmesdale.
- ___ 16. Hester admits to the townspeople that Dimmesdale is her lover.
- ___ 17. Hester wears a scarlet A to show that she lives alone.
- ___ 18. Chillingworth is believed by some to be an agent of the devil.
- ___ 19. Dimmesdale is loved and respected by all the townspeople.
- ___ 20. Hester refuses to leave Boston with Arthur Dimmesdale.
- ___ 21. Chillingworth wants Dimmesdale to confess that he is Pearl's father.
- ___ 22. Hester is overcome with guilt whenever she removes the scarlet letter.

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Essay Test - Literal Level

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THE SCARLET LETTER

Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. The scarlet letter changes Hester's life, forcing her to live outside society. How, then, does the A affect her personality and her thinking concerning the position of women in society?
 2. Discuss the significance of Pearl's behavior toward her mother and the Reverend Dimmesdale during their interview in the forest.
 3. When Dimmesdale mounts the scaffold to confess, Chillingworth moans that the scaffold is the only place where Dimmesdale could have eluded his grasp. Why is this so?
 4. Contrast Dimmesdale's interpretation of the late night appearance of an A in the sky with that of the Puritan magistrates.
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Essay Test - Interpretative Level

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THE SCARLET LETTER

Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. Although a minor character, Mistress Hibbins surfaces several times in the course of the novel. What is her function?
2. Some critics maintain that *The Scarlet Letter* is flawed by too much symbolism. Do you agree? Explain your position by citing specific examples of symbolism in *The Scarlet Letter*.
3. Why is so much attention given to descriptions of Governor Bellingham and his mansion?