The Scarlet Letter

Nathaniel Hawthorne
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**CHARACTER MAP**

**Hester Prynne**
The novel’s main character, she is passionate, creative, candid, resourceful and freethinking. For conceiving a child in her husband’s absence, she is sentenced to wear a scarlet A on her bosom.

**Mother**

**Arthur Dimmesdale**
A successful young minister. He cannot bring himself to lose his excellent reputation and promising career by acknowledging that he slept with the married Hester Prynne.

**In love**

**Pearl**
Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale’s illegitimate child. At age seven, she is frequently described as elfin, fairylike or other-worldly.

**Father**

**Roger Chillingworth**
The assumed name of Hester’s estranged husband. He swears to discover Hester’s lover and take revenge on him.

**Married**

**Reverend John Wilson**
A highly respected Puritan clergyman and friend of Governor Bellingham, with a similar taste for luxury. Based on a real historical figure.

**Mentor**

**Governor Bellingham**
A wealthy and highly respected Boston magistrate. He is a stern Puritan, but also loves beautiful things and physical comforts. Based on a real historical figure.

**Friends**

**Mistress Hibbins**
Governor Bellingham’s sister, who lives with him. She is a self-confessed worshipper of Satan. Based on a real historical figure.

**Friends and housemates**

**The Puritans of Boston**
Dour, judgemental and always gossiping, but with a capacity for kindness. The people of Boston represent prevailing attitudes and normative (mainstream, authorised) values.
OVERVIEW

About the author

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born in 1804 to Nathaniel Hathorne [sic] and Elizabeth Manning. His father, a ship’s captain, died in 1808. Nathaniel Senior’s family, the Hathornes, though not wealthy, were an old Salem family who considered themselves socially far superior to Elizabeth’s family, the Mannings. After Nathaniel Senior’s death, Elizabeth and her son went back to the Mannings’ home, where Hawthorne grew up. After his education at Bowdoin College in Maine in the early 1820s, Hawthorne returned to the Mannings in Salem to hone his writing skills. During this time, while studying New England history, he learned about his Hathorne ancestors’ role in the Salem witch trials of the 1690s. It was ‘perhaps as a gesture of separation from these judgemental people who had hanged witches and wanted nothing to do with his mother and himself’ (p.ix) that he changed the spelling of his name to Hawthorne.

Hawthorne’s first book, a collection of short stories called Twice-Told Tales, was published in 1837. It didn’t sell especially well, but critics liked it. One enthusiastic supporter – the educator, reformer and transcendentalist Elizabeth Peabody – introduced Hawthorne to her sister Sophia, whom Hawthorne would marry. Hawthorne lived briefly at the utopian commune, Brook Farm, and moved, after his marriage, to Concord, where he was friends with transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Margaret Fuller. Though Hawthorne wasn’t a transcendentalist himself, he found them to be stimulating company. He shared with them a Romantic world view, valuing individuality, emotion and nature over tradition, rationalism and technological progress. He published another book of short stories, Mosses from an Old Manse, in 1846.

Also in 1846, Hawthorne had to bow to financial concerns. In order to support his young family, he reluctantly agreed to take advantage of the political spoils system of the day and accept the surveyorship of the Custom House at the Salem harbour. This job involved very few
responsibilities; despite (or perhaps because of) that, Hawthorne found it numbing and was unable to complete writing another manuscript until after the election of 1848, which left his Democrat patrons out of office and Hawthorne out of a job. To add to his misfortunes, Hawthorne also lost his beloved mother in 1849.

Still, the period that followed was a prolific one for Hawthorne. He published *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850, *The House of the Seven Gables* in 1851 and *The Blithedale Romance* in 1852. Hawthorne moved back to Concord to enjoy the company of his transcendentalist friends and made a new writer friend, Herman Melville. In 1853, he was appointed American Consul in Liverpool, England; but again, office work interfered with his creativity. He held this job until 1857, then lived in Italy until 1859. Upon returning to the US, he published his last novel, *The Marble Faun* (1860). His ill health and the changing literary tastes of Americans probably both contributed to his inability to finish any more of the novels he began writing. Hawthorne died in 1864, having never achieved his goal of writing a bestseller, but the importance of his powerful, quintessentially American writing continues to grow.

**Synopsis**

*The Scarlet Letter* begins with a long preface – ‘The Custom-House’ – in which Hawthorne blends autobiography and fiction to show both the historical distance and the close connections between himself (writing in the late 1840s) and the action of the novel (set in the 1640s). ‘The Custom-House’ sets up Hawthorne’s preference for creativity and human connection over decorum and career ambitions; these values are at the heart of *The Scarlet Letter*.

The novel proper begins in 1642, as Hester Prynne mounts the scaffold at the centre of Boston, wearing on her bosom, for the first time, the embroidered A that marks her as a convicted adulteress. The scarlet A seems superfluous: Boston in 1642 is a small enough town for everyone to know that Hester has recently given birth to a baby girl (Pearl) despite the fact that she has been in Boston for two years and her husband has not yet arrived from England to join her. Thus, the scarlet letter of shame
The Scarlet Letter

exists not only as an embroidered badge, but also as a mark of town gossip and as a symbol embodied in the child born out of wedlock.

Adultery requires two parties, but Hester bears her punishment alone. She is determined to protect her lover from disgrace and refuses to reveal his name. Hester's husband arrives in Boston just in time to witness her shame. He asks her not to reveal his identity either. He prefers not to be known as a cuckold (a husband who has been cheated on) and, besides, he has decided that he will secretly discover and take revenge on Hester's lover. He takes the name Roger Chillingworth and introduces himself in Boston as a physician.

As time goes on, we become increasingly aware that Pearl's father must be Arthur Dimmesdale, a scholarly young minister with a gift for oratory and a saintly reputation. Dimmesdale becomes sick and, eventually, Chillingworth moves in with him as his doctor and supposed friend. Meanwhile, Hester takes a cottage on the edge of town. She accepts her lot as an outcast, yet takes every opportunity to help people who are in trouble. Hester supports herself by doing fancy needlework; there's more of a market for such ornate objects than you would expect in an austere Puritan colony. She also creates whimsical, fantastically beautiful clothes for Pearl. Pearl is obsessed with questions about the scarlet letter Hester wears on her bosom; these questions cause Hester pain. In Boston, the significance of the letter has begun to shift: people remember that it originally stood for 'adulteress', but the many whom Hester has aided whisper that it stands instead for 'able'. Only Pearl seems to think that the letter is connected to Arthur Dimmesdale's habit of clutching his heart in pain.

The novel builds towards two dramatic tableaux that both occur in 1649 on the same scaffold where Hester was shamed in 1642. The first occurs on the night of Governor John Winthrop's death. Hounded by guilt, Arthur Dimmesdale decides to spend the night standing on the scaffold. As it happens, Hester and Pearl encounter him there and he asks them to join him. Since it's the middle of the night, Dimmesdale's gesture of confession is secret and fairly pointless. However, as they stand there, the night sky is lit up by a comet that seems to leave a scarlet A in the sky.
Dimmesdale is certain that this is the mark of God’s judgement against him, but people around Boston say that the A stands for ‘angel’ and marks the death of the beloved governor. Pearl challenges Dimmesdale to acknowledge her and her mother in daylight as he does in the secrecy of night, but Dimmesdale does not meet that challenge until the climax of the novel.

The climactic tableau occurs after Hester and Dimmesdale have agreed that they will leave Boston and begin a new life together. Their departure date coincides with the day that Dimmesdale delivers the Election Day sermon, the crowning achievement of his brilliant young career. After his triumphant sermon, his health fails dramatically. He has Hester assist him onto the scaffold of the pillory and, there, he bares his chest – which may or may not be branded with a letter A matching Hester’s – to the crowd, then joins hands with Hester and Pearl, and dies. (His mission of revenge complete, Chillingworth soon dies too.) Dimmesdale never feels redeemed for his affair with Hester; his life has been one of hypocrisy. Hester, by contrast, ends life many years later, regarded by Bostonians as a beloved advisor. She has been publicly marked by shame and sin, yet her kindness and honesty make her strong. She seems to be at peace.

Character summaries

**Hester Prynne:** The novel’s main character. In the absence of her much older husband, Roger Chillingworth, she falls in love with Arthur Dimmesdale and gives birth to Pearl. As punishment for this adultery she must wear the scarlet letter A on her clothes. She makes her living doing fancy needlework.

**Pearl:** The illegitimate daughter of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale. As a child, she tends to be emotionally reserved and frequently hurts her mother’s feelings without meaning to, but after the emotional scene of Arthur Dimmesdale’s death at the end of the book she becomes warmer and kinder.
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*Arthur Dimmesdale:* A successful young religious minister, lover of Hester and father of Pearl. He spends most of the novel tormenting himself with secret penances, public hypocrisy and fantasies about the importance to everyone in Boston of his sin and confession.

*Roger Chillingworth:* The assumed name of Hester's older husband. When he arrives in Boston and discovers that Hester has betrayed him, he decides to keep his true identity a secret, and to discover Hester's lover and take revenge.

*Governor Bellingham:* A wealthy and highly respected magistrate, he represents Puritan Boston's legal power structure. He and the other magistrates are slower than the ordinary people of Boston to forgive Hester Prynne.

*Mistress Hibbins:* Governor Bellingham's sister, who lives with him. Mistress Hibbins may be insane. She talks openly about meeting with Satan, but faces no legal punishments – just a bad reputation.

*Reverend John Wilson:* A highly respected Puritan clergyman and friend of Governor Bellingham, with a similar taste for luxury. He is Arthur Dimmesdale's spiritual and professional mentor.

*The Puritans of Boston:* The people of Boston function like a Greek chorus, indicating prevailing attitudes. Their changing views of Hester Prynne – from scorn and disgust at the novel's beginning to love and respect at its end – reflect Hester's changing views of herself and possibly the progress of her relationship with God as she works to make up for her sin.
BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

The American Renaissance

In the 1840s and 1850s, US writers were busy producing some of nineteenth-century America’s most important works of literature: Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *Essays* (1841 and 1844), Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), Emily Dickinson’s poems (most not published until after her death, but written from around 1850), Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851), Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854) and Walt Whitman’s first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855). This outpouring of literary works was centred mainly in New England and the period during which it occurred is sometimes also called American Romanticism because it marked a departure from tradition and rationalism, and turned towards humanism and emotion. It celebrated nature and spirituality rather than technological progress and organised religion, and it supported democratic inclusivity and a brand of individualism that never turned its back on civic responsibility.

The American Renaissance was very much concerned with questions of what it meant to be American; hence Hawthorne’s ongoing fascination with his Puritan heritage, seen in stories such as ‘The Minister’s Black Veil’ and ‘Young Goodman Brown’ as well as in *The Scarlet Letter*, even as he repudiated many Puritan values. American Renaissance writers tended to be politically engaged but somewhat hard to classify: most of them opposed slavery, as did the Whig party of their day, but they also tended to oppose bureaucracy and the growth of capitalism, as did the Democratic party of their day. The American Renaissance ended as the country began to tear apart with the approach of the Civil War.
Puritan New England

Although the Puritans were an offshoot of the Church of England, their theology and practices were much closer to those of the Scottish Calvinists. Their beliefs and practices included: extreme simplicity of worship; opposition to many secular pastimes, such as card-playing and maypole-dancing, and to the celebration of many traditional Christian holidays, such as Christmas; belief in original sin and natural depravity, that is, that humans are born bad and must depend upon divine grace for salvation; and the belief that God has foreordained everything that will happen, including who is elect (destined to be saved on Judgement Day) and who is reprobate (destined not to be saved). The most extreme Puritans were those who left England first for the Netherlands and then for New England, where they founded a theocracy. The same Governor John Winthrop whose death is remarked upon in Chapter 12 of The Scarlet Letter preached a sermon in 1630 that called for New England to consider itself ‘a city upon a hill’, that is, an example for the rest of the world, as Jesus exhorted his followers to be in Matthew 5:14. By the 1680s, the Puritans’ intolerance of other Christian sects, especially the Quakers, began to provoke England into intervening in the Puritans’ governance of New England. In 1689, a broad religious tolerance act effectively put an end to Puritan rule in what was still an English colony.

Hawthorne plays pretty fast and loose with his representation of Puritans. In many ways, his characters’ interests, obsessions and repressions seem more like those of his uptight Victorian contemporaries than of his Puritan ancestors. This lack of historical accuracy allows him to explore the themes that he wants to explore and is a big part of why he calls his book a ‘romance’, not a ‘novel’.