Shmoop Study Guide
for

The Scarlet Letter
by
Nathaniel Hawthorne

Mrs. Oualline
English III

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In A Nutshell:

*The Scarlet Letter* was published by Nathaniel Hawthorne in 1850, when the United States of America was not yet 100 years old. Upon its release, the novel became an instant hit, as it dealt with community, passion, wild emotion, and rule-breaking. Many Americans were excited to read a book that explored an integral chapter in their country’s history. The novel is set in mid-17th century Massachusetts Bay Colony (read: old school Boston), and it follows Hester Prynne and her lover over the course of seven years. Are you intrigued yet? Read on.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, a Bowdoin College graduate, hung out in college with the likes of poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and future United States President Franklin Pierce. After graduating, Hawthorne found a job at the Custom House (a building where people monitored and documented goods for import and export) in Salem; he was fired from this position in 1849. Shortly thereafter, his mother (who had raised him single-handedly) passed away. Life was not so good. So Hawthorne (who had wanted for so long to write the great American novel) decided to write a book. And that book contained all of the emotion that a grieving man could muster.

The result of Hawthorne’s sudden unemployment is the beautiful, heart-wrenching tale of Hester Prynne. Hawthorne wrote *The Scarlet Letter* feverishly and furiously, and when he read the final words of the final chapter to his wife, she ran to bed crying. At that point, Hawthorne knew he had a hit on his hands.

Hawthorne has an interesting connection to early colonial American history: his ancestors played a role in the persecution of Quaker women, as well as in the prosecution of women in the Salem Witch Trials. In “The Custom House,” the preface to this novel, the narrator alludes to this history, taking blame for the actions of these ancestors and hoping that any curse brought about by their cruelty be removed.

Before we set you loose upon the stunning world of mid-17th century Boston, we want to mention that this was a society governed by Puritans, religious men and women who settled at Plymouth Rock, founded Boston, and began the experiment that grew into the United States of America. The Puritans left the Church of England (the Christian church of, well, England), which they felt was becoming too lax in its doctrines. They sought a purer form of their religion. At the heart of this novel is the concept of man’s relationship to himself and to a Christian God. Hawthorne sets his novel in a deeply religious time, and, thus, the language of the novel and the themes invoked contain deeply religious undertones.
Why Should I Care?

It’s Monday morning, and you slink into your American Studies class with a conscience so guilty, you begin to think the words "I didn’t read the book" are tattooed on your forehead. Your classmates are cheerful chatty Cathys, gleefully exchanging anecdotes about their weekends as they pull out their glossy copies of The Scarlet Letter. This is just going to have to be one of those classes where you do a lot of nodding.

"Did you read the book?" one of your classmates asks the kid sitting across the table. "Oh, heck no," he replies. "Neither did I," replies your classmate. Suddenly, everyone starts talking about how they have not read the book. GREAT. "How in the heck are we going to survive Mr. Chillingbone’s class?" you wonder. Noticing the increasing frenzy, the class clown tries to calm everyone down by saying, "Relax. All we have to know is that the book is about a lady who has an affair with a priest, like, thousands of years ago. It’s juicier than a soap opera. We can make it up as we go."

Mr. Chillingbone, a wise, scarily perceptive Dumbledore look-alike of a man walks into class somberly. He places his book and mug of tea on the table, looks around the room suspiciously, sniffs the air, and his gaze lands on you.

"Class, I hope you enjoyed The Scarlet Letter and are prepared for a lively discussion about the role Mistress Hibbins plays in developing our understanding of Hester Prynne." Gulp.

"You there, Mr. Shmoop?"

"Yes," you reply.

"Why don’t you start us off."

"Start us off?"

"Yes. In fact, why don’t you facilitate our discussion today."

The tattoo is forming on your forehead. You can either 1) run out of class immediately, 2) pretend to have read the book, and lead a class discussion about two characters you’ve never even heard of, or 3) tell the truth.

"I’m sorry, Mr. Chillingbone, but I wasn’t able to read the book." You are so noble.

"What!" Mr. Chillingbone roars. "You’ve been given a whole week to read this classic tale, and you HAVEN’T READ THE BOOK!!" He stares at you with huge disappointment, and it breaks your little scholarly heart. "Who else has neglected to read this work of sheer genius? Who?!"

No one says a thing. Your classmates thumb through their glossy copies, unwilling to fess up.
"Good," Mr. Chillingbone says. "I am glad there are still some scholars left in the world. As for you, Mr. Shmoop, you will receive an F for the week in this class, and you must write a 20-page paper by Friday about the role Mistress Hibbins plays in this novel. You may go now."

Blushing and completely mortified, you leave class. Your classmates stare at you as you go, smirking a little. How does it feel to be Hester Prynne? How does it feel to tell the truth and to feel the pang of injustice? Whether it has to do with class, friendships, parents, or the law, we bet that, on some level, you and Hester have a lot in common.

Character Roles

Protagonist:
Hester Prynne
Hester Prynne is the main character, and, although we do occasionally take time out to follow Reverend Dimmesdale or Roger Chillingworth, the story revolves largely around Hester. She is the focal point of attention and drives the story forward.

Antagonist:
Roger Chillingworth
Roger Chillingworth is the primary antagonist, an enemy of both Hester and Reverend Dimmesdale. Upon finding that his wife has committed adultery, he seeks revenge through tormenting her lover psychologically. We could argue that Chillingworth is the primary roadblock preventing Hester and Dimmesdale's happiness, but Dimmesdale's conscience seems to have a bit to do with it as well.

Guide/Mentor:
Pearl
Pearl is the one character who makes it obvious, by actions and words, that Dimmesdale’s hypocrisy is wrong. She is like an oracle, telling the truth everywhere she goes, and goading others into confronting secrets.

Foil
The Reverend Dimmesdale to Hester Prynne
The Reverend Dimmesdale contrasts with Hester. She must wear her shame publicly because her sin has been discovered; he hides behind his ministerial cloak and only confesses just before he dies. Both are marked by the scarlet letter.
Setting

Boston (Massachusetts Bay Colony), Mid-1600s. The Puritans had settled in New England to practice their religious beliefs after leaving the Old World, where they had been persecuted. The Puritans were a legalistic sect of Protestant Christians influenced by Calvinism. Their beliefs emphasized God’s omnipotence and the concept of election, the idea that salvation is predestined. Religious behavior (and worldly success) was seen as both a result of salvation and evidence of it. Thus, Puritan communities were centered on the idea of purity (as is fairly clear from the name) in thought and deed, and sins were rooted out and punished harshly.

The physical setting of The Scarlet Letter reflects the beliefs and habits of the Puritans. In the first chapter, we are taken on a mini tour of the most important town buildings and structures: namely, the prison and the town scaffold. Law and religion form the heart of the town.

The Massachusetts Bay Colony is surrounded by forest and by ocean, vast expanses of nature. The colony is like an island in the midst of wilderness, and the sense of the unknown and unexplored is tangible. Nature (as represented by this ocean and this wilderness) is far larger than civilization (as represented by the town itself). The colonists are on the frontier, having left the Old World of England in exchange for the New.

Point of View

Third Person, Omniscient. The narrator follows the activities of all the characters from chapter to chapter, revealing their internal thoughts and secret actions. The narrator reveals much about each character that they do not know about each other or even about themselves. He is also inclined to give his own two cents at any given moment, which we may or may not buy.

Genre

Gothic tales contain a mystery or elements of a mystery at their hearts. For most of the novel, we do not know who Hester’s lover is. This mystery man haunts the story.

As for romance, Pearl is a physical manifestation of a passionate love affair, and this romance results in the misery and punishment for Hester, Dimmesdale, and even Chillingworth, which form the bedrock of this novel.

The Scarlet Letter also explores the life and times of early America, and how Puritans dealt communally with sin. The presence-by-absence of references to Native Americans in the novel also reveals much about the Puritans’ colonial attitudes and approaches. We learn as much about early America through the details our narrator omits from the novel as we do from those he includes.
Writing Style

Upon first dipping our toes into The Scarlet Letter, we almost want to run and grab our passports, so strange is Hawthorne’s style to our modern ear. Going with the flow is difficult at first when words like "ignominy" and "cogitating" trip us up. And let’s not forget the sentences that (using a careful net of commas) are almost a page long, forcing us to read and reread the same words about sixty times.

Take for example, the following sentence:

"Doomed by his own choice, therefore, as Mr. Dimmesdale so evidently was, to eat his unsavory morsel always at another’s board and endure the lifelong chill which must be his lot who seeks to warm himself only at another’s fireplace, it truly seemed that this sagacious, experienced, benevolent old physician, with his concord of paternal and reverential love for the young pastor, was the very man, of all mankind, to be constantly within reach of his voice" (9.16).

Whoa. Our brains feel like they've just run a marathon. The trick with Hawthorne is to try to understand the backbone of the sentence. In this case, the backbone is basically saying, "because Dimmesdale has chosen a life of solitude, the fatherly doctor is the perfect companion for him." Get out the sculptor’s tools, and do not be afraid to chip away at the sentences you encounter in this novel. Chances are, when you begin to bend a sentence into an understandable shape, you are bound to find solid gold.

What’s Up With The Title?

Back in the day (colonial times, that is), law and religion were inseparable, like peanut butter and jelly. When a woman cheated on her husband, she had to be punished by law. Even if her husband had been lost for two years and she didn’t think she’d ever see him again. Our heroine Hester Prynne cheats on her husband, her penalty is to wear a big red "A" on her clothing for the world to see.

Three guesses as to what the "A" stands for? Apples, alphabet, or (you guessed it) ADULTERY. When we begin The Scarlet Letter, Hester is carrying out her sentence by displaying her scarlet "A" for the community's enjoyment. One onlooker says that the "A" should have been burned onto Hester’s forehead. This single letter, this leader of the alphabet, serves the purpose of forever separating Hester from the society in which she lives, from the non-adulterers.

However, this A is not only a symbol of Hester’s adultery. Throughout the novel, we see it burn, glow, and change meaning, as though taking on a life of its own. Hester sews it herself, and though it is meant to speak of her sins, it is so beautifully made that the townspeople notice its artistry and craftsmanship before they remember what it means.

The scarlet letter is almost like a character in and of itself, constantly haunting Hester and reminding her of her past. However, through sheer determination, Hester is able to change the meaning of the letter and to earn the respect of those around her.
What's Up With The End?

But everything’s been going so well! Hester and her daughter Pearl can, at long last, escape the iron gaze and judgy ways of Massachusetts Bay colonists. In fact, they’ve been able to put an entire ocean between themselves and those stern Puritans. They live lavishly in England. The End.

But that’s not the end. Hester Prynne returns to the community that shunned her for so long. She goes back to her little cottage on the outskirts of town. She starts wearing the scarlet letter again. And all because she loves Arthur Dimmesdale. Too much of Hester’s life remains in Boston; it’s as though she can only find peace in returning to the Puritan society. The scarlet letter seems to have become part of Hester’s identity, and she cannot feel free without it.

The novel leaves us with a final picture of Hester and Arthur’s gravestone. They have been buried near one another (but not directly next to each other). A motto carved on the headstone they share ensures that their punishment follows them even into death: "on a field, sable, the letter A, gules.”

This motto is a verbal representation of the scarlet letter ("sable" means black and "gules" means reddish). We could interpret this persistent A as a tragic final image. However, the fact that Hester and Dimmesdale can be buried near each other suggests that the community has, in many ways, forgiven them for their adultery. Even after death, the legend of their love continues.

Symbolism, Imagery, Allegory

The Prison Door
The prison door is described as having never known "a youthful era," i.e., innocence (1.2). It’s made of iron and is a little worse for wear, if you catch our drift. Yet, the wild rosebush that grows at the side of the portal is its saving grace. The rosebush represents kindness and forgiveness to the prisoners who must face either a prison sentence or a death sentence (1.2). The iron door seems to represent all that is strict and unrelenting in Puritan society, while the rosebush seems to represent the concept of "grace" or forgiveness. In Christian thought, grace is "unmerited mercy," that is, forgiveness of sins even though forgiveness is undeserved. Since the prison is a place of darkness and sin, the beauty of a wild rose bush growing in such an unexpected place is a symbol of grace. We encounter this prison door and this rosebush in the very first pages of The Scarlet Letter, and both objects seem to tell us that, even in a place of such cold and rigid law, there is hope and there is love.

Pearl, Hester’s Daughter
Pearl, Hester’s daughter, is a symbol of all that Hester gave up when she committed adultery and gave up her place in Puritan society. Pearl is a "pearl of great price," a reference to Jesus’ proverb in the Gospel of Matthew: "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls: Who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it." Matthew 13:45-46. Hester has gone through hell and high water as a result of giving birth to a child. She lives in perpetual punishment because of Pearl, and that is why she loves Pearl so much. The name “Pearl” makes us think of precious jewels, and there is indeed something very regal about Pearl – we know that she becomes a great and wealthy heiress. The name “Pearl” also reminds us of the fact that pearls come from oysters, and oysters are hard to pry open at times. Pearl definitely is not an easy nut to crack – she mysterious and full of mischief.
The Scarlet Letter

The symbolism behind the scarlet letter A changes throughout this novel. Though initially this letter A symbolizes the sin of adultery, Hester Prynne alters its meaning through her hard work and charity. Some people begin to suggest that the A stands for "able," since Hester is such a capable woman. Others begin to recognize that the scarlet letter has begun to achieve holiness, righteousness. It has "the effect of the cross on a nun’s bosom. It imparted to the wearer a kind of sacredness, which enabled her to walk securely amid all peril. Had she fallen among thieves, it would have kept her safe" (13.5). Many years later, when Hester returns and voluntarily takes up the scarlet letter again, it has become, for her and others, a symbol of grace. Hester sews this letter herself while in prison, and the result is breathtaking:

On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter ‘A.’ It was so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel which she wore, and which was of a splendor in accordance with the taste of the age, but greatly beyond what was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony. (2.10)

By embroidering the “A” so finely and ornately, Hester takes control of her own punishment. She owns it. Though the letter causes Hester to live a lonely life of banishment and ostracization, it seems almost immediately to become a symbol for something far nobler than “adultery.” The letter showcases her talent and artistry – skills that allow her to make a living as a single parent in Puritan Boston. As such, it represents her strength and independence. Such qualities set her apart from every other woman around her. Wearing the letter cuts her off from society, but it also frees her in many ways. She is able to observe the cold and strict ways of Puritan society from the perspective of an outsider.

The Red Mark on Dimmesdale’s Chest

The red mark on Dimmesdale’s chest in the shape of the letter A is the physical manifestation of the minister’s guilt. We are never given an exact description of this mark or its origins, but Dimmesdale tells Hester it is from God. Although he refuses to confess and be punished, his sin ultimately marks his body more permanently than Hester’s scarlet letter made from thread does.

The Meteor

We learn that things like meteors-in-the-shape-of-an-A and exploding stars are common occurrences in early America, and that Puritan communities and community leaders would interpret these celestial explosions to be messages from God, typically warning them about bad things ahead or commenting on issues affecting the community. The meteor in The Scarlet Letter exposes both a communal and an individual reaction. The Massachusetts Bay Colony community interprets the meteor-in-the-shape-of-an-A to be a message from God commemorating the life of the recently deceased Governor and proclaiming him to be an angel (“A” for “angel”). Dimmesdale, on the other hand, sees this meteor as symbol of his own sin, as though God were trying to expose his secret to the entire world. He thinks solely about what the meteor means to him and him alone. To us, this crazy occurrence suggests that there’s more than one way to interpret anything. How did you feel when you read about the meteor-in-the-shape-of-an-A? What do you think it signifies?

The Black Man

The Black Man is a euphemism for Satan in this book. Hester considers the scarlet letter A to be the Black Man’s mark, and Pearl wonders aloud if the Black Man left his brand on Dimmesdale’s heart. Our narrator loves to compare Chillingworth to Satan as well. By invoking Satan, our narrator raises the question of whether humans are innately good or evil. A favorite pastime of the Black Man is to hang out in the woods and lure the locals to come hang out with him and sign their names in his book (with their own blood). Mistress Hibbons knows the Black Man well, apparently.
The Forest and the Wilderness

The forest and wilderness are seen as the home or dwelling place of evil by the townspeople. It’s the unknown. Such a wilderness is compared to the moral wilderness in which Hester has been lost for years: "She had wandered, without rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness; as vast, as intricate and shadowy, as the untamed forest" (18.2). The forest contrasts sharply with the town, or "civilization," the former representing a place where passion and emotion reign, and the latter, a place where law and religion prevail. Interestingly, Hester lives on the edge of town, on the border between wilderness and civilization. She straddles both worlds.

We associate Nature with kindness and love from the very beginning of this story, for our narrator tells us that the wild rosebush reminds all that “the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to him” (1.2). As much as we want to root for Nature in this book, it isn’t always a place of comfort and peace. When Hester and Dimmesdale meet in the woods, the brook and the trees seem to listen, talk, and to have secrets of their own. After a few hours in the woods with Hester, Dimmesdale becomes incredibly mischievous and unrestrained. The woods seem to affect people in interesting ways. The creepy Chillingworth harvests his medicine and remedies from the woods and from the seashore – remedies that help keep Dimmesdale alive and, therefore, tortured. The brook that Pearl plays with while her mom and Dimmesdale chitchat is a particularly important brook. It babbles and talks, taking on an almost humanlike quality:

All these 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 the pool. Continually, indeed, as it stole onward the streamlet kept up a babble, kind, quiet, soothing, but melancholy, like the voice of a young child that was spending its infancy without playfulness, and knew not how to be merry among sad acquaintances and events of somber hue. (16.23)

Like Pearl, this brook seems to be almost childlike and yet full of all of the deepest, darkest secrets. It seems to know everything, and it doesn’t seem to be a cheery, gushing brook out of a fairy tale. There’s something distinctly sad about this streamlet. Pearl tries to cheer the brook up, but it won’t be cheered. Her mom tells her that she could understand what the brook was saying if she had suffered something in her life. Pearl thinks the brook is too boring and gloomy to be a plaything, so she finds other things to occupy her while her mom chitchats with Dimmesdale.

However, when Hester calls Pearl over to her in order that she might embrace her dad (Dimmesdale), Pearl hesitates at the edge of the brook, and it forms a kind of divide between her world and that of her mothers. Pearl will not cross this divide until her mother fastens the scarlet letter once more to her chest. It’s as though the scarlet letter binds Pearl to her mother in a way that little else in the world does. She doesn’t seem to know her mother without it. The scarlet letter is a part of both of their identities and is a significant part of their relationship. Why do you think Pearl makes her mother put the scarlet letter back on again? Why is it significant that this babbling, melancholy brook provides Pearl with a perfect, almost flawless mirror reflection at the moment her mother summons her across it?

The Custom House

You may have fallen asleep or skipped the little introductory appetizer to The Scarlet Letter known as “The Custom House.” We don’t really blame you. The language seems particularly thorny, and it’s hard to make out why exactly this introduction is so important. In it the narrator tells us the story of how he came across the scarlet letter and of how he came to write the story down. Our narrator is the chief executive officer of the Salem Custom House (sometime during the mid-1800s). His account is a mixture of fact and fiction and loosely follows the story of how Hawthorne himself came to write The Scarlet Letter.
A Custom House is a governmental building situated near a port or a wharf. All sailors, sea captains, merchants, and sea traders are required to report directly to the Custom House upon laying anchor in Salem. These tradesmen must pay taxes on their imported goods. Things aren’t so hopping in this particular Custom House – business has slowed down and the building itself is falling apart. The narrator describes a statue of the American eagle that hovers over the Custom House entrance:

Over the entrance hovers an enormous specimen of the American eagle, with outspread wings, a shield before her breast, and, if I recollect aright, a bunch of intermingled thunderbolts and barbed arrows in each claw. With the customary infirmity of temper that characterizes this unhappy fowl, she appears, by the fierceness of her beak and eye, and the general truculency of her attitude, to threaten mischief to the inoffensive community. [...] But she has no great tenderness, even in her best of moods, and, sooner or later—oftener soon than late—is apt to fling off her nestlings, with a scratch of her claw, a dab of her beak, or a ranking wound from her barbed arrows. (Custom House.3)

Woowee, that’s one cold bird. We all know the eagle is one of the most famous and beloved symbols of America and of the freedom that America represents. Here, however, we get the image of a very unwelcoming and unfeeling symbol – one that doesn’t care whether you survive or not. This eagle, a statue though it may be, suggests that something might not be right with the Custom House or with the government to which Custom House reports. Upon reading The Scarlet Letter, we begin to think this eagle might be a descendent of the strict Puritans that spurn Hester Prynne so harshly.

The narrator goes on to tell us that his ancestors were involved in both the Salem Witch Trials as well as in the persecution of Quakers. Needless to say, the narrator feels mighty guilty and mighty weirded out by the fact that he is related to so many hateful and cold people. He also seems to hear their voices in his head, mocking his dream of becoming a writer (“Why, the degenerate fellow might as well have been a fiddler!” [Custom House.9]).

One day, while exploring the abandoned and slightly creepy second floor of the Custom House, our speaker comes across a scarlet letter A and an account of its history written by a former chief executive officer of the Custom House. Our narrator, inspired to write his own version of this incredible story, can’t seem to tap into his creative juices in the stifling workplace environment. As luck would have it, he gets laid off! He finds himself scorned and rejected by an organization he has so long worked for, and, therefore, he feels a connection to Hester Prynne. Through his account, we see a more modern account of house laws and government can be stifling and cruel.
Study Questions

Chapter 1
1. What is the setting of The Scarlet Letter?
2. What does Hawthorne begin the story with a reflection about the need for a cemetery and a prison?
3. What is the significance of the wild rosebush that grows beside the prison door?
4. What was Ann Hutchinson?
5. What does Hawthorne achieve by his reference to “the sainted Ann Hutchinson”?

Chapter 2
1. On what note does this chapter begin?
2. What is Hawthorne saying about the Puritan women of the New World?
3. For what sin is Hester Prynne condemned?
4. What is the Old Testament punishment for adultery?
5. What is the public view of Hester’s sin as expressed by the women outside the prison? What do their comments suggest about this society?
6. What is Hester’s punishment?
7. What is surprising about the “A” Hester has sewn for herself? What might this indicate?
8. What is accomplished by Hawthorne’s allusion to the Madonna and Child?
9. What does the flashback reveal about Hester’s past?

Chapter 3
1. What purpose does the conversation between the townsman and the stranger at the beginning of this chapter serve?
2. Why wasn’t Hester sentenced to death for her adultery?
3. Where has the stranger been? What motion does he make to Hester?
4. Who is Dimmesdale? What appeal does he use to convince Hester to reveal the baby’s father?
5. What is Hawthorne foreshadowing with the stranger’s prediction that the name of the father will eventually be disclosed?

6. What is ironic about Dimmesdale’s reaction to Hester’s refusal to name the father of her child?

7. Explain the allusion in the townsman’s telling Chillingworth, “that matter remaineth a riddle; and the Daniel who shall expound it is yet a-wanting.”

Chapter 4
1. Who does the stranger Hester recognized in the crowd that afternoon turn out to be?

2. Why does Hester fear Chillingworth?

3. Explain Chillingworth’s attitude toward Hester.

4. What does Chillingworth intend to do and why?

5. What does Chillingworth ask Hester to promise? Why does she agree?

6. What is foreshadowed by Chillingworth and Hester’s exchange at the end of the chapter?

Chapter 5
1. How is Hester’s emergence from the prison at the end of her confinement different from her emergence on the day she stood in public humiliation?

2. What traditional dichotomy does Hawthorne begin to establish with the location of Hester’s cottage?

3. Give two reasons why Hester decides to remain instead of moving to a less-restrictive colony.

4. How do the townspeople treat Hester, and how does she react?

5. How does Hester’s character evolve?

6. Describe the difference between Hester’s clothing and her child’s.

7. What point is Hawthorne making about an individual’s ability to separate oneself from one’s wrongdoings?

8. Where do Hawthorne’s sympathies lie? How do you know?

Chapter 6
1. What, according to the narrator, is ironic about Pearl’s existence?
2. What is the significance of Pearl's name?

3. What is significant about Pearl's temperament?

4. Explain the ambiguity concerning Pearl’s background.

5. Hester believes that, while society punishes her for sinning, God has a different reaction. How does Hester explain Pearl's existence?

**Chapter 7**

1. How sincerely concerned are the townspeople for the souls of Hester and Pearl?

2. Compare the Governor's garden with gardens in Old England. What is significant about the difference?

3. How is Pearl dressed, and what is her dress compared to?

4. Where else have we seen a rose bush in this novel?

5. What was its significance then?

6. Does it maintain the same significance here? Why or why not?

**Chapter 8**

1. Explain the Puritan attitude toward luxury and how Governor Bellingham and the Reverend John Wilson responded to it.

2. How do the magistrates react to Pearl and why?

3. How does Hester behave toward the magistrates and why?

4. Why does Hester feel that Arthur Dimmesdale should speak on her behalf?

5. Why would Hawthorne have Pearl perform such an uncharacteristically tender action?

6. What does Chillingworth note about Dimmesdale's defense of Hester?

7. Describe how Dimmesdale has changed since Hester's public punishment.

8. Describe how Chillingworth has changed over the last few years.

9. Why would Hawthorne want to include Mistress Hibbins as a minor character in this book?
Chapter 9

1. Why doesn’t Chillingworth assert his rights as Hester’s husband?

2. A difference of opinion arises over the cause of Dimmesdale’s failing health. Compare the townspeople’s opinion to Dimmesdale’s.

3. Why does Dimmesdale reject Chillingworth’s offer of help? What finally persuades him to accept the offer?

4. Explain the ambiguity of the chapter’s title, “The Leech.”

5. The passage sets up an interesting contrast between two types of men. What is this contrast, and how is it likely to shape the future of the novel?


7. Describe the relationship between Dimmesdale and Chillingworth.

8. Some people in the community feel that God has sent Chillingworth to heal their minister, but other people have a different view. Explain the second view about Chillingworth.

9. How do the people explain “the gloom and terror in the depths of the poor minister’s eyes”?

10. What is suggested by the names Chillingworth and Dimmesdale?

Chapter 10

1. What is suspicious about Dimmesdale’s position in his debate with Chillingworth about sin?

2. How do the black flowers initiate a discussion of hidden sins?

3. How does Dimmesdale’s rationale for not confessing a hidden sin support the doctrine of salvation by works rather than salvation by faith and grace?

4. What metaphors does Hawthorne establish for Chillingworth’s probe? How do they further define Chillingworth’s character?

5. What does Chillingworth mean when he mutters, “A strange sympathy betwixt soul and body! Were it only for the art’s sake, I must search this matter to the bottom!”?

6. What does Chillingworth do while Dimmesdale sleeps, and what does his action symbolize? Describe Chillingworth’s reaction and what his response reveals about his character.

7. What do you suppose is the specific secret that Chillingworth discovers?
Chapter 11

1. Explain the statement, “[Chillingworth] became, thenceforth, not a spectator only, but a chief actor, in the poor minister’s interior world.”

2. What is ironic about Dimmesdale’s incredible success as a minister?

3. Why are Dimmesdale’s public assertions of guilt ironice?

4. Explain the ways that Dimmesdale tortures himself.

5. Comparing Dimmesdale’s current struggle with his sin with Hawthorne’s earlier treatment of Hester and her sin, what is Hawthorne suggesting about the effects of sin?

6. What is ironic about Hawthorne’s portrayal of the Puritan society, in terms of this developing theme?

Chapter 12

1. How is the episode of Dimmesdale’s midnight vigil on the scaffold structurally significant?

2. What is the significance of Pearl’s challenge to Dimmesdale?

3. Although Governor Winthrop is merely mentioned in the book, why would Hawthorne choose this night as the night Dimmesdale stands on the scaffold with Hester and Pearl?

4. How does Dimmesdale feel as he holds Pearl’s hand and why?

5. Why does Pearl pull away from Dimmesdale?

6. What effect does Dimmesdale’s vigil have on his career?

Chapter 13

1. What is significant about Hester’s position in the community now that years have passed?

2. Compare the feelings of the general public to those of the community leaders regarding Hester Prynne. Explain why the groups view her differently.

3. What social and philosophical changes is Hawthorne describing in this chapter?

4. Explain the statement: “It is remarkable, that persons who speculate the most boldly often conform with the most perfect quietude to the external regulations of society. The thought suffices them…”

5. Compare the initial intent behind the scarlet letter to the actual effect on Hester.
6. What does Hester do and why?

7. What is Hawthorne’s point in comparing Hester’s and Dimmesdale’s reactions to their sin?

8. What image is Hawthorne evoking with Chillingworth, old, one shoulder higher than the other, digging up roots and collecting leaves, etc., in the forest?

Chapter 14

1. Notice that Chillingworth is called a “leech” in the chapters in which he interacts with Dimmesdale, but a “physician” in this interaction with Hester. Considering the definition of “leech,” what do you suppose is Hawthorne’s point in using these two designations?

2. What is Hester’s response to the announcement that the Council had debated allowing her to remove her scarlet letter?

3. How is the doctrine of predestination reflected in this conversation between Hester and Chillingworth?

4. Why does Chillingworth believe he has a double reason for punishing Dimmesdale?

5. Compare Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth in terms of their responses to the initial sin.

6. What pleas of Hester’s arouse sympathy and admiration in Chillingworth?

7. What does Hester ask of Chillingworth? What is his response?

Chapter 15

1. What is Hester coming to realize is the true sin she has committed? Why would Hawthorne consider this a worse sin than her sin with Dimmesdale?

2. What does Hester realize about her “repentance”?

3. Why does Hester hate Chillingworth?

4. Hester refuses to answer Pearl’s questions about the meaning of the “A.” Why does Hester not confide in Pearl?

5. Why does Hawthorne portray Pearl as such a wild child?

6. How have Hester’s conversations with Chillingworth and Pearl changed her attitude toward herself and her sin?
Chapter 16

1. Explain the significance of the sunlight imagery.

2. When Hester determines to warn Dimmesdale about Chillingworth, why does the meeting take place in the forest?

3. Explain the probable allusion in the line “the minister and she would need the whole wide world to breathe in.”

4. What positive significance does the forest begin to take on?

5. What negative significance does the forest begin to assume?

6. In what way does Hester acknowledge her sin to Pearl?

Chapter 17

1. How is Hawthorne advancing his theme of the difference between revealed and secret sin?

2. Explain the distinction Dimmesdale make between penance and penitence.

3. What do we learn is the emotional connection between Hester and Dimmesdale? Why is this significant to the developing theme of the book?

4. Do you believe Hester is to blame for Dimmesdale’s suffering during the past seven years? Why or why not?

5. What theme about the nature of sin finally begins to emerge in Hester and Dimmesdale’s conversation?

6. Who are the heartless people with laws of iron to whom Hester refers?

7. This chapter ends on an optimistic note. What is the source of the optimism?

Chapter 18

1. What contrast does the narrator point out between Hester and Dimmesdale’s ability to leave town?

2. Why does Dimmesdale decide to flee with Hester?

3. What is significant about the title of this chapter?

4. How does Hawthorne reinforce his idea that nature is sympathetic to Hester and Dimmesdale?

5. Why would children dislike Dimmesdale?
Chapter 19

1. Beyond Hester’s explanation, why won’t Pearl come to Hester without the scarlet letter?

2. What is significant about the fact that Pearl will not bring her the scarlet letter, but makes her pick it up for herself?

3. Why won’t Pearl show any affection to Dimmesdale? Why does she want him to walk with them hand-in-hand in the marketplace?

4. This chapter begins on the same optimistic note that ends the previous chapter. On what kind of note does the chapter end? Why?

Chapter 20

1. What would account for Dimmesdale’s sudden change?

2. In terms of Hawthorne’s theme contrasting hidden sin versus revealed sin, how can you explain Dimmesdale’s change in this chapter?

3. Why is the chapter called “The Minister in a Maze”?

Chapter 21

1. Compare these first-generation New Englanders with their recent English ancestors and with their future New England descendents.

2. What distressing news does Hester receive from the ship captain?

3. In addition to providing more information, what other purpose does this chapter serve?

Chapter 22

1. What is Hawthorne’s point about the governor’s ability to govern? Does he seem to find fault with them? Why or why not?

2. What is the source of Dimmesdale’s apparent new strength?

3. What does Pearl want from Dimmesdale?

4. Explain the remarks, “The sainted minister in the church! The woman of the scarlet letter in the marketplace!”

5. What is Mistress Hibbins saying about the people of Salem Village?

6. What clues has Hawthorne offered his reader to prepare him or her for the revelation of the scarlet letter on his chest?
Chapter 23

1. Many critics believe the novel is structured around three scaffold scenes: the ones in Chapters 2, 12, and 23. Explain how each fits into the typical plot scheme of conflict, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution.

2. Why does Dimmesdale stand “on the very proudest eminence of superiority” before the crowd?

3. What does Chillingworth mean when he says, “There was no one place...where thou couldst have escaped me—save on this very scaffold!”

4. In what way is Dimmesdale’s sin worse than Hester’s? Of Hester, Chillingworth, and Dimmesdale, whose sin is the worst? Why?

5. What accounts for the change in Pearl?

Chapter 24

1. What theories are given about the scarlet letter imprinted in the minister’s flesh?

2. Why does Hawthorne leave the origin of Dimmesdale’s mark ambiguous?

3. What happens to Chillingworth? What does he give Pearl?

4. What becomes of Pearl?

5. Why do you suppose Hester returns to Salem? What might be Hawthorne’s point about sin, repentance, and redemption?

6. Why would Hawthorne allow the story to end with Hester and Dimmesdale being remembered so ignominiously?