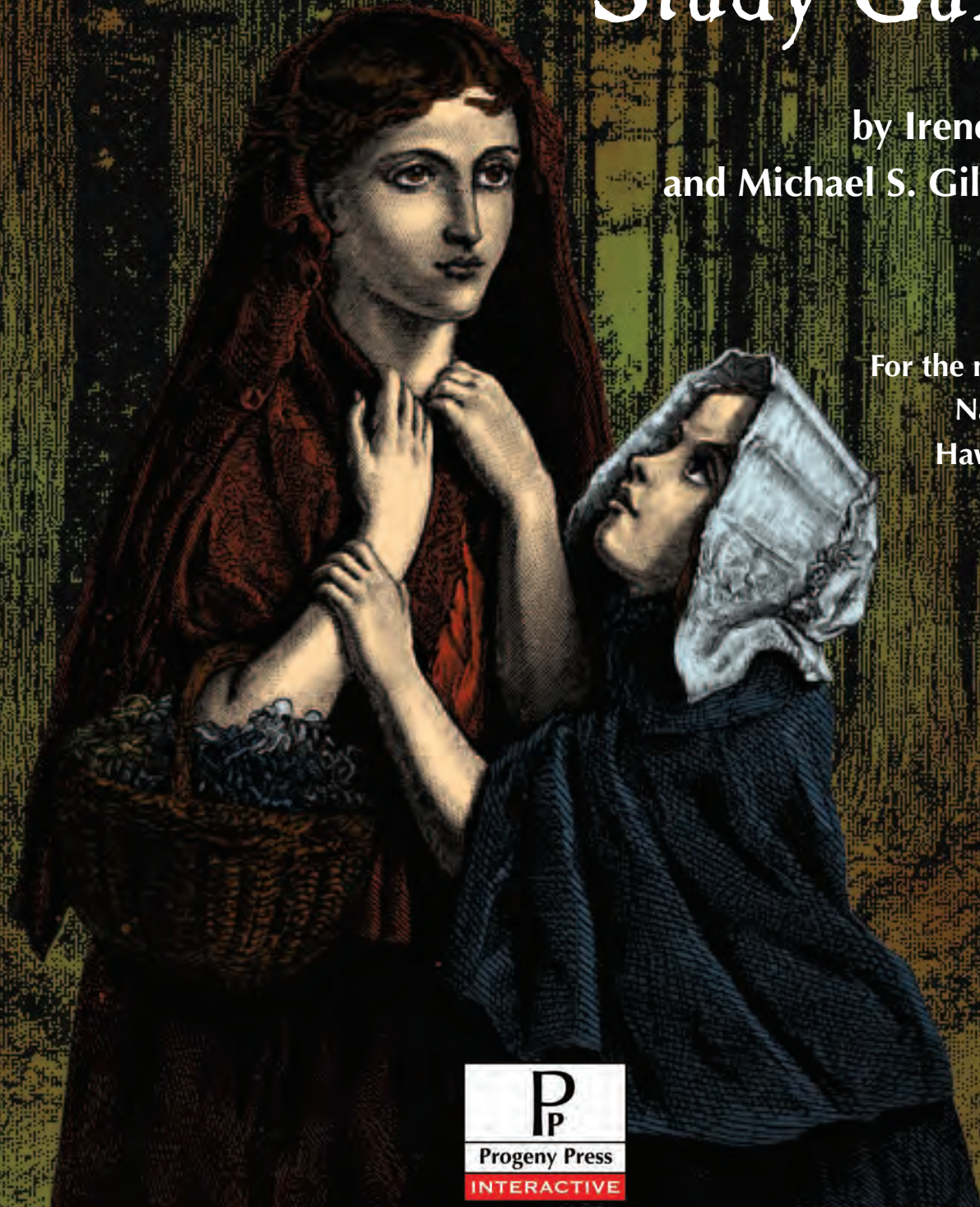


The Scarlet Letter Study Guide

by Irene Lape
and Michael S. Gilleland

For the novel by
Nathaniel
Hawthorne



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The Scarlet Letter Study Guide
A Progeny Press Study Guide
by Irene Lape and Michael Gilleland

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Note to Instructor

How to Use Progeny Press Study Guides. Progeny Press study guides are designed to help students better understand and enjoy literature by getting them to notice and understand how authors craft their stories and to show them how to think through the themes and ideas introduced in the stories. To properly work through a Progeny Press study guide, students should have easy access to a good dictionary, a thesaurus, a Bible (we use NIV translation, but that is up to your preference; just be aware of some differences in language), and sometimes a topical Bible or concordance. Supervised access to the Internet also can be helpful at times, as can a good set of encyclopedias.

Most middle grades and high school study guides take from eight to ten weeks to complete, generally working on one section per week. Over the years, we have found that it works best if the students completely read the novel the first week, while also working on a prereading activity chosen by the parent or teacher. Starting the second week, most parents and teachers have found it works best to work on one study guide page per day until the chapter sections are completed. Students should be allowed to complete questions by referring to the book; many questions require some cross-reference between elements of the stories.

Most study guides contain an Overview section that can be used as a final test, or it can be completed in the same way the chapter sections were completed. If you wish to perform a final test but your particular study guide does not have an Overview section, we suggest picking a couple of questions from each section of the study guide and using them as your final test.

Most study guides also have a final section of essays and postreading activities. These may be assigned at the parents' or teachers' discretion, but we suggest that students engage in several writing or other extra activities during the study of the novel to complement their reading and strengthen their writing skills.

As for high school credits, most Christian high schools with whom we have spoken have assigned a value of one-fourth credit to each study guide, and this also seems to be acceptable to colleges assessing homeschool transcripts.

Internet References

All websites listed in this study guide were checked for appropriateness at the time of publication. However, due to the changing nature of the Internet, we cannot guarantee that the URLs listed will remain appropriate or viable. Therefore, we urge parents and teachers to take care in and exercise careful oversight of their children's use of the Internet.

Synopsis

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

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

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

About the Author

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born in 1804 in Salem, Massachusetts. His family had deep roots in New England. The earliest paternal ancestor came to Massachusetts in the Great Migration of 1630 and had a role in the persecution of Quakers in the colony; this man's son was a judge at the Salem witchcraft trials in 1692, a fact that haunted Hawthorne's imagination throughout his life. Many of his forebears were sea captains, including his own father, who died in Dutch Guiana in 1808. Hawthorne went to college at Bowdoin in Maine and decided early in his life to be a writer. He was known to be very shy and retiring; he lived with his mother between 1825 and 1837, where he wrote and was very reclusive. Hawthorne worked for two years at the Boston Custom House beginning in 1838 and then, under the influence of his fiancée, Sophia Peabody, lived for a time at the famous Brook Farm community. He was married in 1842 after a four-year engagement. After his marriage, he lived at Concord, Massachusetts, and became close friends with the famous and influential Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Financial necessity drove him to accept a political appointment to the custom house in Salem in 1846, and he held this position until his party (the Democrats) were turned out of office in 1849. He tells about this sojourn in the preface to *The Scarlet Letter*. Only when he was free of this job was he able to write again seriously. *The Scarlet Letter* was published in 1850 and was followed by several other successful books. Election of his old college friend, Franklin Pierce, to the presidency in 1852 resulted in his being appointed to the position of U.S. consul in Liverpool, England, a position he held until 1857. He and his family then traveled to Italy, where he wrote for several years. He returned to the United States in 1860. In the last four years of his life, he had great difficulty completing any writing project he started. He died of an unknown ailment in 1864 just before his 60th birthday.

Ideas for Pre-reading Activities

The Scarlet Letter is not historical fiction in the usual sense of that term, but it is a book in which the author explores themes that are deeply dependent on an historical context—the period of Puritan settlement of Massachusetts. Also, for the reader to achieve a sense of perspective on the context and themes of the book, it is useful to know something about the ideas of the New England Transcendentalists who were centered in Concord, Massachusetts, and with whom Hawthorne was intimate. For these reasons the following pre-reading exercises are suggested.

1. Do some reading and research into the early history of the Massachusetts Bay Colony (1630–1695) and the religious ideas of its founders. It is helpful to have some understanding of Calvinism and some familiarity with the early controversies in the colony over Ann Hutchinson and antinomianism, attempts of the Quakers to preach in the colony, and the famous witchcraft trials of the early 1690s. Choose among the following topics for a short paper or papers based upon this research:
 - a. The Religious Beliefs of the Puritans
 - b. The Puritan Ideas of Government and Law
 - c. The Trial of Ann Hutchinson
 - d. The Salem Witch Trials

2. Read a characteristic essay by Ralph Waldo Emerson such as “Nature” or “Self Reliance” as a way of familiarizing yourself with the ideas of this influential thinker of the early 19th century in America. Emerson’s Romanticism and the ideas of the New England Transcendentalists were ideas that Hawthorne largely rejected, but they influenced him greatly and set the intellectual agenda for the period in which he wrote. His own writing is an attempt to explore many of these ideas.

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3. Discuss each of the questions below in a brief paper. In your paper explain what you think the verses listed, taken together, teach about these topics.
- a. Does civil government have a role in enforcing the laws of God ?
 - Deuteronomy 30:11–20
 - Matthew 5:14–16
 - Romans 13:1–7
 - Corinthians 5:9–13

 - b. What is the solution to the problem of sin?
 - Jeremiah 17:9
 - Romans 5:20–21
 - 1 John 1:8–2:2

 - c. How should we respond to people who sin?
 - Galatians 6:1–5
 - Matthew 7:1–5

“The Custom House”

*“ . . . let them scorn me as they will, strong traits of their nature
have intertwined themselves with mine.”*

Questions:

1. According to this story, what are Hawthorne’s feelings about the town where he was born?
2. What does Hawthorne say that his ancestors would have thought of him and why?
3. Who are the people Hawthorne mentions as his “dreamy brethren of Brook Farm”?
4. Who is Jonathan Pue?

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5. What physical sensation does Hawthorne have when he holds the “A” against his chest?

6. Why is it fortunate that Hawthorne was tossed out of this job when his party lost the 1848 elections?

7. According to the document he says he found, how was Hester Prynne remembered in the community?

Analysis:

8. How does Hawthorne seem to feel about his Puritan ancestors and his link with them? Discuss the positive and negative feelings he has about them.

9. No one has ever found the document Hawthorne says was an outline of his “romance” and most critics do not believe that there ever was such an outline. Why do you think Hawthorne might have made this up?

Chapters 1–4

*. . . The Lord shall make us a praise and glory,
so that men shall say of succeeding plantations:
“The Lord make it like that of New England.”*

*For we must consider that we shall be like a City upon a Hill;
the eyes of all people are on us.*

John Winthrop

Vocabulary Exercises:

Part 1:

Read each sentence below paying close attention to the usage of the underlined word. Specify whether the word is being used as a noun, verb, adjective, or adverb, and give its definition.

1. The bad weather and my illness gave an inauspicious start to the vacation.
Part of speech: _____
Definition:
2. The stern look on the judge’s face augured ill for the defendant.
Part of speech: _____
Definition:
3. He indubitably has the intelligence to do better than he does.
Part of speech: _____
Definition:

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4. Antinomians and Quakers were considered to be heterodox in their religious ideas to the early Puritan.
Part of speech: _____
Definition:
5. In the 17th century, adultery was considered to be an infamy, to be punished severely.
Part of speech: _____
Definition:
6. The farthingale was an important item of fashion in the 16th century.
Part of speech: _____
Definition:
7. Hester refused to be abashed by the treatment she received from the townspeople.
Part of speech: _____
Definition:
8. The woman was nervous and the smile on her lips evanescent.
Part of speech: _____
Definition:
9. Wearing a scarlet “A” to mark her adultery was an ignominy for Hester.
Part of speech: _____
Definition:
10. For Puritan society, public contumely constituted a large part of the punishment of people considered to be criminals.
Part of speech: _____
Definition:

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11. The American colonists, upset by being taxed without having a representative in Parliament, sent a remonstrance to the King.

Part of speech: _____

Definition:

12. It was his wont to visit the cafe each afternoon after school.

Part of speech: _____

Definition:

Part 2:

Knowing the origin of a word can be very useful, not only for clearer understanding of the word you want to know but for understanding words that use the same root. Identify the root word or concept for each of the following words and then give the definition.

1. physiognomy

Root: _____

Definition:

2. antinomian

Root: _____

Definition:

3. malefactress

Root: _____

Definition:

4. sumptuary

Root: _____

Definition:

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5. preternatural

Root: _____

Definition:

6. heterogeneous

Root: _____

Definition:

Questions:

1. Chapter 1 opens with “bearded men, in sad-colored garments and gray, steeple-crowned hats, intermixed with women” standing before a building. For what are they waiting?

2. Why is Hester Prynne being punished, and what is her punishment?

3. Much of Hawthorne’s description of the people in the square is dark, stern, and foreboding. Yet kindness, or at least forbearance, is demonstrated by several of them. List three ways in which the people have not judged Hester as severely as we might have expected.

4. What do you learn about Hester’s life before she came to the Puritan settlement?

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5. Who is the man who comes out of the forest and sees Hester standing before the crowd, who acts as her physician later in jail? Where has he been for more than a year?

Analysis:

6. What does Hester's husband most want to know? What does he plan to do with this information?
7. Chillingworth asks that Hester keep his identity secret—he makes her swear to this. What reason does he give for asking this? What other motivations might account for his insistence on anonymity?
8. *Foreshadowing* is a literary device by which the author gives hints or clues about what is to come. At the end of Chapter 4, Hester asks Chillingworth, "Art thou like the Black Man [Satan] that haunts the forest round about us? Hast thou enticed me into a bond that will prove the ruin of my soul?" Chillingworth answers, "Not thy soul. . . . No, not thine!" What does Hawthorne seem to be foreshadowing here?

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Dig Deeper:

9. At the end of Chapter 4, Hester is keeping two secrets: the identity of her baby's father and the true identity of Roger Chillingworth. Are the two secrets equal in importance? What do you think about the wisdom of keeping each of them?

10. Is keeping secrets wrong? Under what circumstances might it be wrong and under what circumstances might it be right? Read Proverbs 11:12, 13; 20:19; and 25:9, 10.

For Discussion:

Is there a difference between keeping a secret and lying?

Chapters 5–7

“Her sin, her ignominy, were the roots which she had struck into the soil.”

Vocabulary:

Select the word from the word box that best expresses the meaning of the given vocabulary word.

Word Box

maze	frolic	ghastly	tractable
empathy	austere	amulet	scattering
arcane	sensuous		

1. lurid _____
2. talisman _____
3. commiseration _____
4. ascetic _____
5. voluptuous _____
6. diffusion _____
7. disport _____
8. labyrinth _____
9. amenable _____
10. cabalistic _____

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Questions:

1. Why does Hester stay in New England instead of escaping her punishment by returning to England or going elsewhere?
2. Where does Hester live and how does she support herself?
3. How does Hawthorne describe Pearl's appearance and behavior?

Analysis:

4. In Chapter 5, much is made of Hester's penitent lifestyle: she remains where her sin is known, she keeps the "A" in plain view, she does charity work, etc. By "earthly punishment," "the torture of her daily shame," she seems to be seeking martyrdom. Read Philippians 3:13, 14; Isaiah 43:18, 19; Ephesians 2:8, 9; and Galatians 3:2, 3. What do these verses say about Hester's and her town's attitude about continual shame and penance? Will these things cleanse her?

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5. Many of the people Hester deals with treat her with “quiet malice,” insults, and repugnance. Why are they doing this and what are they saying about themselves and Hester?

6. *Imagery* is used by authors to create impressions or associations in our minds between the descriptive word and the character or item described. In Chapter 7, what colors does Hawthorne use to describe Pearl? What impression does this give you?

Dig Deeper:

7. In the last paragraphs of Chapter 5, Hester is horrified and fights against an impression she continually feels. What is this impression? Read 1 John 1:8–10. How does this apply to the feeling that Hester sometimes gets?

Read Matthew 7:1–5 and Romans 2:1–3. In light of these verses, what is the danger of judging the way Hester is being judged?

Chapters 8–11

*. . . I am well aware of my faults,
I have my sin constantly in mind,
having sinned against none other than you,
having done what you regard as wrong.*

Psalm 51

Vocabulary:

Part 1:

In the parentheses in each sentence below, write a *synonym* that could replace the preceding underlined vocabulary word, while retaining its meaning in the sentence.

1. “Individuals of wiser faith, . . . who knew that Heaven promotes its purposes without aiming at the stage effect of what is called miraculous interposition, (_____) were inclined to see a providential (_____) hand in Roger Chillingworth’s so opportune (_____) arrival.”
2. “Mr. Dimmesdale, whose sensibility of nerve often produced the effect of spiritual intuition, would become vaguely aware that something inimical (_____) to his peace had thrust itself into relation with him.”
3. “His [Chillingworth’s] gesture, his gait, his grizzled beard, his slightest and most indifferent act, the very fashion of his garments, were odious (_____) in the clergyman’s sight; a token implicitly (_____) to be relied on of a deeper antipathy (_____) in the breast of the latter than he was willing to acknowledge to himself. For, as it was impossible to assign a reason for such

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distrust and abhorrence (_____), so Mr. Dimmesdale, conscious that the poison of one morbid spot was infecting his heart's entire substance, attributed all his presentiments (_____) to no other cause."

4. "... given over to the machinations (_____) of his deadliest enemy, the Reverend Dimmesdale had achieved a brilliant popularity in his sacred office.... His intellectual gifts...were kept in a state of preternatural (_____) activity by the prick and anguish of his daily life."
5. "He thus typified the constant introspection (_____) wherewith he tortured, but could not purify, himself."

Questions:

1. How long has it been since the beginning of the story? How old is Pearl?
2. Why is Bellingham considering taking Pearl away from Hester?
3. How does Pearl answer when Bellingham asks who made her? Does she know the correct answer?

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4. Who among the Governor's companions speaks for Hester?

5. Who has become Arthur Dimmesdale's physician? How do some people say he came to town?

6. Why does Dimmesdale need a physician?

Analysis:

7. Governor Bellingham and Mr. Wilson are considering placing Pearl in someone else's care. Hester wants to keep her child. Which side's argument considers the best interests of Pearl? Considering Pearl's behavior so far, which side do you think is most correct?

8. What does the scene with Mistress Hibbins at the end of Chapter 8 reveal to us about Hester?

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9. How do people view Roger Chillingworth at the start of Chapter 9? How do many people view him at the end of the chapter?

List some of the descriptive words Hawthorne uses to communicate this change.

10. Chapters 9–11 chronicle a change in Chillingworth’s relationship with Dimmesdale. What was Chillingworth’s original purpose in examining and developing a relationship with Dimmesdale? What changed?
11. *Personification* is the technique of giving human attributes to material things. Chillingworth does the very opposite to Dimmesdale, totally stripping Dimmesdale of his human qualities. List some phrases Hawthorne uses to demonstrate this.
12. What hangs on the walls of Dimmesdale’s library? What is its significance?

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Dig Deeper:

13. Hawthorne sets up various contrasting situations or descriptions of Dimmesdale and Chillingworth, characterizing Dimmesdale as a man of light (godly) and Chillingworth as a man of darkness (demonic). List three of these situations or descriptions.

14. At the beginning of Chapter 10, Hawthorne says Chillingworth “had begun an investigation, as he imagined, with the severe and equal integrity of a judge, desirous only of the truth.” Read Proverbs 14:12, 1 Corinthians 10:12, and Galatians 6:1. How do these verses apply to Chillingworth’s investigation? How do they apply to us?

15. Near the middle of Chapter 10, Chillingworth and Dimmesdale get into a discussion of the worth of confession of sins, possibly public confession. Describe in a few sentences the argument of each, specifically in paragraphs beginning: “True; there are such men,” and “These men deceive themselves.” Read James 5:16. Which character do you most closely agree with and why? Is this verse discussing public or private confession, and how does it apply to the argument?

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16. Read Hebrews 2:18; 4:15, 16. What character from *The Scarlet Letter* is similar to the attributes described in these verses? Quote a passage demonstrating this similarity and explain the similarity. In what very important way are the two people described in the book and in these verses opposite?

Chapters 12–15

*“Standing alone in the world—alone, as to any dependence on society,
and with little Pearl to be guided and protected—
alone, and hopeless of retrieving her position, . . .
she cast away the fragments of a broken chain.
The world’s law was no law for her mind.”*

Vocabulary:

Part 1:

Underline the word that comes closest to defining the vocabulary word.

- | | | | |
|-------------------------|-------------|------------------|--------------------|
| 1. somnambulism: | nightmare | sleep-walk state | inability to sleep |
| 2. inextricable: | inescapable | complicated | not convenient |
| 3. expiation: | termination | atonement | escape |
| 4. pristine: | finicky | recent | uncorrupted |
| 5. despotic: | tyrannical | important | malicious |
| 6. effluence: | ending | weight | consequences |
| 7. obviated: | evident | made unnecessary | old |
| 8. propinquity: | proximity | likeness | favoritism |

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

Questions:

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

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

Analysis:

7. Contrast Dimmesdale's ascension of the scaffold in Chapter 12 with Hester's ascension in Chapter 1. List at least three differences.

8. In Chapter 13, Hawthorne says, "The rulers, and the wise and learned men of the community, were longer in acknowledging the influence of Hester's good qualities than the people. . . . Thus it was with the men of rank, on whom their eminent position imposed the guardianship of the public morals." Do you think the community leaders were justified in a sterner stance than regular citizens of the community? Why?

9. Pearl has begun to ask serious, thoughtful questions of her mother. What does Hester answer when Pearl asks the meaning of the scarlet letter? How is this significant?

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Dig Deeper:

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

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

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

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

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

Chapters 16–19

“Of penance I have had enough! Of penitence there has been none!”

Vocabulary:

Match the vocabulary on the left with the definition on the right.

- | | |
|----------------------|--|
| 1. ___ scintillating | a. sparkling |
| 2. ___ scrofula | b. swelling of lymph glands |
| 3. ___ dell | c. satisfying |
| 4. ___ loquacity | d. quality of being next to, in contact with |
| 5. ___ cadence | e. freedom of choice |
| 6. ___ contiguity | f. partial justification or excuse |
| 7. ___ misanthropy | g. transforming |
| 8. ___ malignity | h. rhythmic quality |
| 9. ___ satiating | i. secluded hollow |
| 10. ___ latitude | j. pictorial writing |
| 11. ___ trammelled | k. one who inhabits a place |
| 12. ___ extenuation | l. talkativeness |
| 13. ___ transmuting | m. appeased or satisfied |
| 14. ___ denizen | n. confined or hampered |
| 15. ___ hieroglyphic | o. distrust of mankind |
| 16. ___ mollified | p. tending to produce death or deterioration |

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Questions:

1. As Hester walks through the forest, what happens when she nears the sunshine?
What happens when Pearl nears the sunshine?
2. What does Hawthorne say that Pearl needs to soften and humanize her?
3. What does Hester tell Dimmesdale to do to take advantage of what she calls “Heaven’s mercy”?
4. What does Hester do to show that the past and all its problems are behind them?

Analysis:

5. At one point early in their discussion in the forest, Hester tells Dimmesdale, “You wrong yourself in this. . . . You have deeply and sorely repented. . . . Is there no reality in the penitence thus sealed and witnessed by good works?” Dimmesdale responds, “Of penance I have had enough! Of penitence there has been none!” What distinction is Dimmesdale drawing? Give some examples of his penance.

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6. Sunlight, as a character, plays a large part in these chapters. In what way does Nature, through sunlight, exercise moral judgment in these chapters? On what, according to Hawthorne, does Nature base its favor?

7. *Personification* is a literary device by which an object, animal, or idea is given human attributes to more clearly communicate mood or emotion or give a clearer picture of an image. For instance, “The sun smiled,” gives the sun the human ability to smile and communicates warmth and benevolence. Give several examples of personification from the last two paragraphs of Chapter 18.

8. Look at the descriptions and words of Arthur Dimmesdale in Chapters 8 and 17. Note how Dimmesdale is portrayed in the two chapters. Use examples from the text to compare (show similarities) or contrast (show differences between) the two characterizations.

Dig Deeper:

9. When Hester and Dimmesdale first meet in the woods, they discuss whether they have found peace. When Dimmesdale speaks of his misery, Hester reproves him:

“You wrong yourself in this,” said Hester, gently. “You have deeply and sorely repented. Your sin is left behind you, in the days long past. Your present life is not less holy, in very truth, than it seems in people’s eyes. Is there no reality in the penitence thus sealed and witnessed by good works? And wherefore should it not bring you peace?”

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Dimmesdale replies:

“No, Hester, no! . . . There is no substance in it! It is cold and dead, and can do nothing for me! Of penance I have had enough! Of penitence there has been none! Else, I should long ago have thrown off these garments of mock holiness, and have shown myself to mankind as they will see me at the judgment-seat.”

Reviewing what you know of Dimmesdale’s situation, which of these two do you feel is most correct? Support your answers from the text and the Bible, if possible.

10. When Dimmesdale is told who Roger Chillingworth really is, he declares, “We are not, Hester, the worst sinners in the world. . . . That old man’s revenge has been worse than my sin. He has violated, in cold blood, the sanctity of a human heart. Thou and I, Hester, never did so!” What does Dimmesdale mean by this? Is he correct?

11. What does Pearl ask about Arthur Dimmesdale at the end of Chapter 19? What does she demand of her mother? Looking back over previous chapters, what has Pearl consistently asked her mother and Dimmesdale? What does this imply?

Chapters 20–24

*I am the one who reproveth and disciplines all those he loves:
so repent in real earnest. Look, I am standing at the door, knocking.*

*If one of you hears me calling and opens the door,
I will come in to share his meal, side by side with him.*

Revelation 3:19, 20

Vocabulary:

For each of the underlined vocabulary words, guess from the context what you think the word means and then check the definition in your dictionary.

1. “So great a vicissitude in his life could not at once be received as real.”

Your definition:

Dictionary definition:

2. “The pathway among the woods seemed wilder, more uncouth with its rude natural obstacles, and less trodden by the foot of man, than he remembered it on his outward journey.”

Your definition:

Dictionary definition:

3. “‘I profess, Madam,’ answered the clergyman, with a grave obeisance, such as the lady’s rank demanded and his own good-breeding made imperative. . .”

Your definition:

Dictionary definition:

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4. “Scorn, bitterness, unprovoked malignity, gratuitous desire of ill, ridicule of whatever was good and holy, all awoke, to tempt, even while they frightened him.”

Your definition:

Dictionary definition:

5. “Like all other music, it breathed passion and pathos, and emotions high or tender, in a tongue native to the human heart, wherever educated.”

Your definition:

Dictionary definition:

6. “It indicated the restless vivacity of her spirit, which today was doubly indefatigable its tiptoe dance, because it was played upon and vibrated with her mother’s disquietude.”

Your definition:

Dictionary definition:

7. “So etherealized by spirit as he was, and so apotheosized by worshipping admirers, did his footsteps, in the procession really tread upon the dust of earth?”

Your definition:

Dictionary definition:

8. “Others contended that the stigma had not been produced until a long time subsequent, when old Roger Chillingworth, being a potent necromancer, had caused it to appear through the agency of magic and poisonous drugs.”

Your definition:

Dictionary definition:

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9. “This unhappy man had made the very principle of his life to consist in the pursuit and systematic exercise of revenge; and when, by its completest triumph and consummation, that evil principle was left with no further material to support it it only remained for the unhumanized mortal to betake himself wither his Master would find him tasks enough, and pay him his wages duly.”

Your definition:

Dictionary definition:

10. ““On a field, sable, the letter A, gules.””

Your definition:

Dictionary definition:

Questions:

1. Where do Hester and Dimmesdale plan to go to escape from their situation in New England?
2. What does the narrator say were the qualities that were respected in early Puritan political leaders?
3. What does Chillingworth do to thwart Hester’s and Dimmesdale’s plan?

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4. How does the town respond to Dimmesdale's announcement from the scaffold?

Analysis:

5. On his way home from his meeting with Hester, Dimmesdale experiences some strange impulses. What are some of the things he is tempted to do? Why do you think he is tempted to do these things?
6. Compare Dimmesdale's physical and mental state in Chapter 20 with Hester's at the beginning of Chapter 18. Describe the similarities and differences.
7. Why does Dimmesdale suddenly leave the procession from the church and go to the scaffold? Did you expect this action? Is it in character?

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Dig Deeper:

8. In Chapter 21, Hawthorne describes the crowd gathered for the holiday and speaks of two groups of “barbarians.” What two groups are these and which group does he describe as “wilder”? Note the relation of these groups to the choices Dimmesdale has before him at the end of Chapter 17. What might this say about Hester’s and Dimmesdale’s choice?

9. At the end of Dimmesdale’s climactic confession, Pearl finally gets her wish:

“My little Pearl,” said he feebly, . . . “dear little Pearl, wilt thou kiss me now? Thou wouldst not yonder, in the forest! But now thou wilt?”

Pearl kissed his lips. A spell was 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 for ever 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.

What three questions are answered or problems solved in this scene?

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10. At the end, Dimmesdale says, with apparent joy, “God knows; and He is merciful! He hath proved his mercy, most of all in my afflictions. . . . Praised be his name!” It seems strange for Dimmesdale to be joyful and grateful as he faces death and ignominy after so many years of pain and misery. Read Proverbs 3:11, 12; Hebrews 12:5–11; 1 Corinthians 13:12; Philippians 3:8–11. How do these verses illustrate what Dimmesdale may have been experiencing?

Summary Essays

1. Hawthorne examines or describes many events and characters from different viewpoints, demonstrating that a person's point of reference or frame of mind can affect how he or she views reality. Two examples are the comet in Chapter 12 (which Dimmesdale saw as a giant "A" for adultery, leading to guilt, and his sexton saw as a giant "A" for angel, leading to joy) and the letter on Dimmesdale's chest as he stands on the scaffold (which most saw, but those unwilling to accept his sin claimed was not there). Choose two characters, objects, or events in the story and demonstrate how Hawthorne describes them from different points of view and how this affects your impression of them. As a conclusion, describe how this technique affects the story as a whole.
2. Hawthorne was heavily influenced by the Puritan tradition and the Romantic and Transcendentalist movements. Puritanism concentrated on the fundamentals of the Bible and Calvinism (personal responsibility, etc.) and weaving them into every aspect of life. Romantics and Transcendentalists sought beauty and freedom in nature, stressed emotion over reason, and emphasized subjectivity and individualism. These influences can result in incompatible beliefs or tendencies, which in some cases are illustrated in *The Scarlet Letter*. Do some research on Puritanism and Romanticism or Transcendentalism. Write a short paper examining whether Dimmesdale might represent the best of Puritanism (aside from the adultery, of course) and whether Hester might embody Romanticism. Under this scenario, what is Hawthorne examining in this story? How does Pearl fit in?

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3. Trace the role of the forest through *The Scarlet Letter*. Does Hawthorne seem to treat the forest as a positive entity or a negative entity? Is there a pattern to its descriptions and function in the story?

Additional Resources

Other Books by Nathaniel Hawthorne:

The House of the Seven Gables

The Marble Faun

The Celestial Railroad and Other Stories

The Blithedale Romance

Young Goodman Brown and Other Tales

Critical Studies on Nathaniel Hawthorne:

*The Romance in American Studies
in Cooper, Poe, Hawthorne, Melville
and James*

by Joel Porte, published by Wesleyan
University

*The American Novel:
From James Fenimore Cooper
to William Faulkner*

edited by Wallace Stegner, published by
Basic Books

*The Practice of Fiction in America:
Writers from Hawthorne to the Present*

by Jerome Klinkowitz, published by
Iowa State University Press

*In Hawthorne's Shadow: American
Romance from Melville to Mailer*

by Samuel Chase Coale, published by
University Press of Kentucky

New Essays on The Scarlet Letter

edited by Michael J. Colacurcio, published
by Cambridge University Press

Hawthorne: Calvin's Ironic Stepchild

by Agnes McNeil Donahue published by
Kent State University Press

Books About the History and Culture of New England:

*Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways
in America*

by David Hackett Fischer, published by
Oxford University Press

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Wilderness and the American Mind

by Roderick Nash, published by Yale
University Press

American Utopianism

by Robert S. Fogarty, published by Peacock
Publishers, Inc.

The Inner Civil War:

*Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis
of the Union*

by George M. Fredrickson, published by
Harper & Row