The Scarlet Letter
Summer Reading · Study Questions


[Note for 12th Grade: Students need not read the articles and criticism unless they wish. **The required reading is The Scarlet Letter and the short stories “Young Goodman Brown,” “The Minister’s Black Veil,” and “The Birth-mark.”**]

For your convenience, the Barnes & Noble La Cantera location has agreed to carry this title in stock.

**Instructions:** Please answer the following questions in your journal and be prepared to turn them in on the first day of class. You can use your journal from 11th grade or you may get any other spiral or journal. The school will not provide one for you.

**Chapter 1 – The Prison Door**

1. What tone and/or mood is established in this chapter? What elements create this tone/mood?

2. What is the point of contrasting the prison with the rose bush?

3. Who is Ann Hutchinson? Why did Hawthorne introduce her at this point?

4. The author “plucked one of its flowers” (the rose bush) and presented it to the reader; what is the significance of this symbolic literary act?

**Chapter 2 – The Market-Place**

1. What if any resemblance is there between the prison and the people in the marketplace?

2. Hawthorne said that the spectators were “a people amongst whom religion and law were almost identical.” What does this reveal about them?

3. How does Hawthorne describe the women in the marketplace? How does his description of the women compare with his description of Hester? What is the point of this stark contrast?

**Chapter 3 – The Recognition**

1. What do we learn about Chillingworth (the stranger who came to town with the Indian) from his response to seeing Hester on the scaffold along with Hester’s feelings upon seeing him? Does his name hint to his character?

2. On page 47 Governor Bellingham is introduced and it is said of him and the other men who stood in judgment that: “out of the whole human family, it would not have been easy to select the same number of wise and virtuous persons, who should be less capable of sitting in judgment of an erring woman’s heart.” Why does the author believe that these men are so ill equipped?

3. When Dimmesdale interviewed Hester (page 49) did he secretly hope she would confess or was he trying to urge her to keep quiet?
Chapter 4 – The Interview

1. What do we learn about Chillingworth from his conversation with Hester in the prison?

2. Why did Chillingworth want Hester to keep his identity a secret? Was she wise in agreeing to the proposition?

3. What would you say was Chillingworth’s objective as it relates to the father of Hester’s child?

Chapter 5 – Hester at Her Needle

1. After all she had been through and continued to endure, why didn’t Hester leave and start a new life somewhere else?

2. Hawthorne made Hester a seamstress who produced garments used in official and important ceremonies. Why did he choose this type of work for Hester? What is his point?

3. With what “new sense” did the scarlet letter endow Hester? How does one’s understanding of their own sin affect how they interact with others?

Chapter 6 – Pearl

1. In many ways Pearl is a contradiction; discuss how she is a contradiction and why you think Hawthorne chose to present her in this way.

2. What kind of interaction did Pearl have with the other Puritan children?

3. Pearl never had playmates so she created them, but this is what is said about those creations:

   “She never created a friend, but seemed always to be sowing broadcast the dragon’s teeth, whence sprung a harvest of armed enemies, against whom she rushed to battle.” (page 65)

   What do we learn about Pearl from this?

4. Why was Pearl so fascinated by the scarlet letter her mother wore?

Chapter 7 – The Governor’s Hall

1. Why did Hester dress Pearl as “the scarlet letter endowed with life”? (page 69)

2. Hawthorne spends a lot of time describing the house of Governor Bellingham; what point is he trying to make? To answer this question you will need to look at the first few paragraphs of chapter 8.

Chapter 8 – The Elf-Child and the Minister

1. How did Dimmesdale convince the other men at Governor Bellingham’s mansion to allow Hester to keep Pearl?

2. What hints have been given so far that reveal Dimmesdale is Pearl’s father?

Chapter 9 – The Leech

1. Is Dimmesdale’s health failing because of his guilt or is Chillingworth actively causing it?

2. What did the townspeople come to believe was the cause of Dimmesdale’s failing health?
**Chapter 10 – The Leech and His Patient**

1. When did Chillingworth first realize that Dimmesdale was Pearl’s father?

2. Why was Dimmesdale unable to recognize that Chillingworth was not a friend to him?

3. How did Dimmesdale justify not confessing that he is Pearl’s father?

**Chapter 11 – The Interior of a Heart**

1. Describe Dimmesdale’s ministry at this point in the story. Why is he so effective? What impact is his popularity having on him? (Page 96 has a great summary of what Dimmesdale is experiencing).

**Chapter 12 – The Minister’s Vigil**

1. What does Hawthorne mean when he questions whether Dimmesdale went to the scaffold as “the mockery of penitence”?

2. How does Pearl interact with the minister on the scaffold? Why is this important?

**Chapter 13 – Another View of Hester**

1. Why did Hester believe that Dimmesdale had the “right to her utmost aid”? (Page 104)

2. How would you reconcile Hawthorne’s almost constant criticism of the Puritans with this statement on page 105:

   “It is to the credit of human nature, that, except where its selfishness is brought into play, it loves more readily than it hates.”

3. Now I want you to analyze the quote above; is this a true assessment of human nature?

4. This chapter talks a lot about the changes that occurred in Hester and then it states: “The scarlet letter had not done its office.” What does this mean?

**Chapter 14 – Hester and the Physician**

1. On page 110 Hester says to Chillingworth, “It lies not in the pleasure of the magistrates to take off this badge; were I worthy to be quit of it, it would fall away of its own nature.” What does she mean?

2. What has happened to Roger Chillingworth?

3. Hester asks Chillingworth if Dimmesdale has paid his debt. Chillingworth responds “No!—No!—He has but increased the debt.” What does he mean?

**Chapter 15 – Hester and Pearl**

1. In this chapter Hester declares her hatred of Roger Chillingworth. She then says: “He has done me worse wrong than I did him!” Why would she say this and do you agree? What does this reveal about Hester?

2. How does Hawthorne try to alter our perception of Pearl in this chapter?
**Chapter 16 – A Forest Walk**

1. On page 120 Hester tells Pearl “Once in my life I met the Black Man! This scarlet letter is his mark!” What is she saying and why would she say this?

2. At the end of the chapter it says that Dimmesdale believed that “Death was too definite on object to be wished for, or avoided.” What does this mean?

**Chapter 17 – The Pastor and His Parishioner**

1. Analyze Dimmesdale’s claim on page 124:

   “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. Happy are you, Hester, that wear the scarlet letter openly upon your bosom! Mine burns in secret.”

2. Why did the minister refuse to go away with Hester? See page 127.

**Chapter 18 – A Flood of Sunshine**

1. Earlier we learned that the scarlet letter had not done its office and at the beginning of this chapter we see what the scarlet letter had produced in Hester. How did the letter change Hester? How had Dimmesdale changed?

2. Why is the forest a good setting for the events of this chapter?

**Chapter 19 – The Child at the Brook-Side**

1. Explain why Pearl and Hester seem estranged at this point in the novel.

2. What does Pearl understand about love, guilt, and shame that Hester and Dimmesdale don’t?

**Chapter 20 – The Minister in a Maze**

1. What does it say about Dimmesdale that he was so intent to “terminate his professional career” with people saying “that I leave no public duty unperformed, nor ill performed!”?

2. Why was Dimmesdale’s encounter with Mistress Hibbins important?

3. What does Chillingworth mean when he says on page 143:

   “‘I joy to hear it,’ answered the physician. ‘It may be that my remedies, so long administered in vain, begin now to take due effect. Happy man were I, and well deserving of New England’s gratitude, could I achieve this cure!’”

**Chapter 21 – The New England Holiday**

1. How did Hester feel as she came into town the day the new Governor was to take office?

2. How does Pearl respond when she learns that the minister will not greet them on this day?

**Chapter 22 – The Procession**

1. What does Hawthorne say distinguished the “primitive statesmen?”
2. What is the source of Dimmesdale's renewed vigor? What is Hester feeling at this point in the story?

3. How does this chapter bring the story full-circle?

**Chapter 23 – The Revelation of the Scarlet Letter**

1. How did the minister change throughout the celebration? What is the source of this change?

2. What does Chillingworth mean when he says on page 160: “’Hadst thou sought the whole earth over,’ said he, looking darkly at the clergyman, ‘there was no one place so secret—no high place nor lowly place, where thou couldst have escaped me—save on this very scaffold!’”

3. How did Hester respond to Dimmesdale's confession?

4. How is Pearl transformed on pg 162? What was her purpose in the story?

**Chapter 24 – Conclusion**

1. How do you think the scarlet letter appeared on Dimmesdale and why?

2. How did Dimmesdale’s death affect:
   - Chillingworth
   - Pearl
   - Hester
   - The people of the town

3. On page 165 it says of Hester, after she returned to the cottage:

   “But there was a more real life for Hester Prynne, here, in New England, than in the unknown region where Pearl had found a home. Here had been her sin; here, her sorrow; and here was yet to be her penitence.”

   Why does Hester still feel the need for penitence?

4. What is the meaning of the last line in the book?