The Scarlet Letter

The Scarlet Letter begins with a prelude in which an unnamed narrator explains the novel's origin. While working at the Salem Custom House (a tax collection agency), the narrator discovered in the attic a manuscript accompanied by a beautiful scarlet letter "A." After the narrator lost his job, he decided to develop the story told in the manuscript into a novel. The Scarlet Letter is that novel.

The novel is set in seventeenth-century Boston, a city governed by strict Puritan law. The story begins as Hester Prynne, the novel's protagonist, is led out of a prison carrying an infant, named Pearl, in her arms. A bright red "A" is embroidered on her chest. A crowd waits expectantly as Hester is forced to climb a scaffold to endure public shame for her sin. While on the scaffold, Hester is terrified to recognize her estranged husband, Chillingworth, in the crowd. He recognizes her too, and is shocked. Chillingworth pretends not to know Hester, and learns her story from a man in the crowd: she was married to an English scholar who was supposed to follow her to Boston but never showed up. After two years she fell into sin, committing the adultery that resulted in her baby and the scarlet "A" on her breast. Chillingworth predicts the unknown man will be found out, but when the beloved local reverend Arthur Dimmesdale commands Hester to reveal the man's name, she refuses and is sent back to her prison cell. Chillingworth poses as a doctor to get inside the prison to speak with Hester, and forces her to promise never to reveal that he's her husband.

Three years pass. Hester is let out of prison and moves to the outskirts of Boston, near the forest. She makes a living as a seamstress, though the people who employ her still shun her. Hester refuses to tell Pearl what the scarlet letter signifies, and Pearl becomes obsessed with the letter. Meanwhile, Chillingworth is working in Boston as a physician, though he has no formal medical training. One of his patients is Dimmesdale, who has fallen ill with heart trouble. Chillingworth moves in with Dimmesdale to care for him full-time and begins to suspect a connection between Dimmesdale's heart ailment and Hester's crime. When he discovers that Dimmesdale has carved a mark over his heart that resembles Hester's scarlet letter, Chillingworth realizes that Dimmesdale is Hester's lover. Chillingworth decides to torment and expose Dimmesdale.

Under Chillingworth's cruel care, Dimmesdale's health deteriorates. Dimmesdale's guilt for committing and concealing adultery causes him profound emotional suffering. He even starves and whips himself as punishment. One night Dimmesdale mounts the same scaffold upon which Hester was publicly shamed. At just that moment, Hester and Pearl pass by and join Dimmesdale on the scaffold. A meteor lights the sky in the shape of a red "A" and illuminates Chillingworth standing nearby.

Hester decides she must help Dimmesdale, and pleads with Chillingworth to stop tormenting him. Chillingworth acknowledges that he's become cruel and wicked, but argues that he's actually protecting Dimmesdale by not revealing his secret to the public. Hester then takes matters into her own hands: she intercepts Dimmesdale in the forest and tells him Chillingworth's true identity. She convinces Dimmesdale to flee with her and Pearl to Europe, and they make plans to take a ship the day after Dimmesdale is scheduled to deliver an important sermon. Dimmesdale delivers the sermon (the best of his life). However, he realizes he's dying and won't make it to Europe. He mounts the scaffold and asks Hester and Pearl to join him. He confesses his sin to the crowd and bares his chest, revealing a scarlet letter carved into his own skin. He dies as Pearl kisses him for the first time.

Hester and Pearl leave Boston. Chillingworth dies a year after Dimmesdale, leaving Pearl a small fortune as an inheritance. Many years later, Hester returns to her cabin on the outskirts of town. She still wears her letter "A." Pearl has married into money in Europe and writes to Hester on occasion. Hester remains in Boston until her death and is buried alongside Dimmesdale. Their shared tombstone bears a letter "A."
I H T T S R L by tormenting Dimmesdale, Chillingworth transforms himself out of love and irresistible desire. Chillingworth recognizes his true identity as her husband in order to avoid the humiliation of being associated with their scandalous affair. In the end, by tormenting Dimmesdale, Chillingworth transforms himself into a sick and twisted man, a kind of fiend.

The Narrator — The unnamed narrator is inspired to write The Scarlet Letter after discovering the scarlet letter and fragments of its story in an attic of the Custom House. He describes the novel as a tale of “human frailty and sorrow” and encourages the reader to heed its moral. Throughout the novel, the narrator favors Hester against the Puritans who persecute her. His writing often reads as if he’s pained to have to tell such a sad story that involves the downfall of innocent victims at the hands of an oppressive society.

Mistress Hibbins — Governor Bellingham’s sister. She invites Hester to a witches’ meeting in the woods and brings the letter A, gules,” which means “On a black background, the scarlet letter burns.” In The Scarlet Letter, nature stands in contrast to Puritanism. Where Puritanism is merciless and rigid, nature is forgiving and flexible. This contrast is made clear from the very first page, when the narrator contrasts the “black flower” of the prison that punishes sin with the red rose bush that he imagines forges those sentenced to die. The theme of nature continues with the forest outside Boston, which is described as an “unchristianized, lawless region.” In the dark forest, wild, passionate, and persecuted people like Hester, Pearl, Mistress Hibbins, and the Indians can escape from the strict, repressive morality of Puritan society. The forest, which provides a measure of comfort and protection that exists nowhere in society, is also the only place where Hester can reunite with Dimmesdale. When Hester moves to the outskirts of Boston, the narrator says she would have fit in better in the forest. Hester’s choice to live on the border of society and nature represents her internal conflict: she can’t thrive entirely within the constraints of Puritanism, but because of her attachment to society and to Dimmesdale, she also can’t flee.

Governor Bellingham — The governor of Boston and the brother of Mistress Hibbins. Bellingham conducts himself like an aristocrat, enjoying money, luxury, and the privileges of power. Yet when it comes to the actions of others, Governor Bellingham punishes any behavior that does not fit with the strict Puritan rules of behavior. This makes him a hard-hearted hypocrite. For instance, even while employing Hester to do fancy needlework for him, he tries to take Pearl from her, arguing that as an adulterer she’s an unfit mother. Later, he convicts and executes his own sister of practicing witchcraft.

John Wilson — A jovial and grandfatherly English pastor who is loved for his kindness and benevolence. He serves as a mentor to Dimmesdale, though his somber and severe preaching style differs sharply from Dimmesdale’s calm, compassionate approach.

Jonathan Pue — The narrator’s predecessor as Surveyor of the Salem Custom House. Pue wrote the original narrative about the scarlet letter, which the narrator discovered and turned into The Scarlet Letter.

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The Occult

The first association most people have with the town of Salem, Massachusetts is the infamous “Salem Witch Trials.” Set in and around Boston, The Scarlet Letter also deals with the specter of witchcraft and the occult. But the novel treats witchcraft and the occult sympathetically. By associating Pearl with other outcasts like Mistress Hibbins, Hawthorne suggests that witches were created by, and victims of, the excessively strict Puritan society. Puritan society created the witches by being unchristianized, lawless region.” In the dark forest, wild, passionate, and persecuted people like Hester, Pearl, Mistress Hibbins, and the Indians can escape from the strict, repressive morality of Puritan society. The forest, which provides a measure of comfort and protection that exists nowhere in society, is also the only place where Hester can reunite with Dimmesdale. When Hester moves to the outskirts of Boston, the narrator says she would have fit in better in the forest. Hester’s choice to live on the border of society and nature represents her internal conflict: she can’t thrive entirely within the constraints of Puritanism, but because of her attachment to society and to Dimmesdale, she also can’t flee.

The Puritans mean for the scarlet letter to be a symbol of Hester’s shame. But the narrator describes the letter as a “mystic symbol” that means many things. The letter does represent Hester Prynne’s adultery, but as she grows and changes in the novel, the letter’s symbolism evolves as well. For instance, it comes to mean “able” when she becomes a successful seamstress, and Dimmesdale refers to Hester twice as “angel,” giving the letter yet another meaning. In the end, the letter comes to symbolize Hester’s triumph over the very forces that meant to punish her.

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Summary and Analysis

The color-coded bars in Summary and Analysis make it easy to track the themes through the work. Each color corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section. For instance, a bar of indicates that all five themes apply to that part of the summary.

The Custom-House

A nameless narrator (who has a similar biography to Hawthorne) describes his job as chief executive officer of a Custom House, the place where taxes were paid on imported goods. The narrator describes his Custom House colleagues as “wearisome old souls” and Salem, the town where it was located, as old and run-down.

One rainy day, the narrator discovered a peculiar package in the upstairs storage area of the Custom House. The package contained a piece of fabric with a red letter “A” affixed to it along with several pages explaining the history of the letter. The narrator says this discovery formed the core of the story that he will now tell in The Scarlet Letter.

The narrator mentions that he’s since lost his job at the Custom House. He draws a distinction between his “figurative self,” whom the public would expect to be dismayed by the lost job, and the “real human being” who welcomed the changes in his life that allowed him to become “again a literary man.”

The narrator says he now has the time to write The Scarlet Letter, a story he hopes to tell the world. He hopes to make his own mark as a writer and be remembered as a “scribbler of bygone days.”

Chapter 1

A crowd of men and women assemble near a dilapidated wooden prison. The narrator remarks that the founders of every new settlement have always sought first to build a prison and a graveyard. He adds that this particular prison was most likely built upon the founding of Boston and describes prisons as the “black flower of civilized society.”

Next to the prison door stands a blooming wild rose bush. The narrator imagines that perhaps the rose bush grows in such an unlikely place to offer comfort to prisoners entering the jail and forgiveness from Nature to those leaving it to die on the scaffold.

The narrator describes the rose bush as sitting on the threshold of the story he plans to tell. He then plunges one of the rose blossoms and offers it to the reader. He describes the gesture and the blossom as a symbol of the moral that the reader might learn in reading his “tale of human frailty and sorrow.”

Prisons are a “black flower” because though they are meant to punish sin (represented by the color black in the novel), they would not exist without sin. Prisons feed on sin in order to grow.

The prison, a “black flower,” contrasts with the beautiful rose bush, which grows naturally. The prison punishes, Nature and the rose bush forgive.

The narrator’s split public and private identity mirrors Hester and Dimmesdale’s experience of the pressure to conform to the public expectations of the community.

The narrator writes with a sense of purpose: he hopes to teach the lessons of Hester’s ordeal to generations of readers. He also seeks fame.

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Chapter 2

The crowd outside the prison grows restless waiting for Hester Prynne to appear. The faces in the crowd are grim, yet familiar, since Puritans gathered often to watch criminals be punished. The narrator says that the Puritans considered religion and law to be almost identical.

Some of the Puritan women waiting outside the prison say Hester deserved a harsher sentence. One states that Revered Dimmesdale, Hester’s pastor, must be ashamed that a member of his congregation committed such an awful sin. Another says that Hester should have been executed for her sin.

Punishments, like the prison, are supposed to hate sin, but seem to thrive on it. They gather with a kind of grim fascination to watch sinners get punished and even executed.

The comments about Hester paint the Puritans as cold and harsh. The mention of Dimmesdale’s shame fore- shadows his association with Hester and her crime.

Chapter 3

Suddenly as Hester looks out into the crowd she recognizes Roger Chillingworth, her husband, standing beside an Indian at the edge of the crowd. She clutches her baby in alarm. It cries out in protest.

Chillingworth is “civilized and savage.” He is small, intelligent looking, and somewhat deformed, with one shoulder higher than the other.

Chillingworth’s face becomes horrified when he sees that the woman on the scaffold is Hester, his wife. Chillingworth and Hester’s eyes lock. He quickly places his fingers to his lips to silence her.

Chillingworth asks a man about Hester’s identity and crime. The man is surprised Chillingworth hasn’t heard about Hester’s notorious sin. Chillingworth says that he’s been held captive by Indians. He asks the man to explain Hester’s crime.

In contrast to the crowd, Hester, the sinner, is natural and beautiful. She faces the crowd alone, as an individual.

By embroidering the letter, Hester transforms a badge of shame into a symbol of individuality. The narrator connects the letter to nature with the word “fertile.”

Hester’s appearance again contrasts with the Puritans. Despite her sin, or perhaps because of it, she is a vibrant individual.

The letter is a symbol of identity. It is a symbol of the Virgin Mary. Hester suggests this symbol of purity to the crowd only by contrast. But the narrator seems to imply the symbol really does fit her.

Divine Maternity is a name for the Virgin Mary. Hester suggests this symbol of purity to the crowd only by contrast. But the narrator seems to imply the symbol really does fit her.

Hester offers to rebel, whereas the Puritans all remain quiet conformers. The Puritans make Hester suffer to create a “spectacle” to scare people away from sinning.

Hester overcomes being shamed by retiring into her own mind. Her sense of self serves as a shield against the Puritans’ judgments.

Hester is surrounded by symbols of sin herself: the letter, Pearl. The letter splits her identity into a public self that the Puritans dominate and a private self she controls.

The person who should comfort Hester (her husband) makes her feel uneasy and alone.

Chillingworth contrasts with the nature.

Chillingworth endorses Hester in order to protect his reputation. He ensures he isn’t associated with Hester’s sin.

Chillingworth seems almost cold-blooded, lying about his past while watching his wife suffer on the scaffold just to protect his reputation.
Chillingworth asks who fathered Hester’s child. The man says that the child’s father remains a mystery and suggests that Hester’s husband comes from Europe to investigate the matter himself. The man also notes that Hester did not receive the full “extremity of righteous law,” which would have punished her with death. Chillingworth says Hester’s sentence makes more sense because now Hester will serve as a living “sermon against sin.”

Chillingworth predicts that the man who fathered Hester’s child will eventually be revealed and repeats the phrase, “he will be known!”

Mr. Wilson, an elderly local reverend, questions Hester and calls on her pastor, Arthur Dimmesdale, to question her about her sin. Dimmesdale demands that she reveal the identity of her baby’s father, but she says she will never reveal his name. Mr. Wilson then delivers a fiery sermon about sin, after which Hester returns to her prison cell.

Chapter 4

When Hester and Pearl return to prison, Pearl cries uncontrollably. The prison guards allow a doctor in to help calm her. Posing as a physician, Roger Chillingworth enters and gives healing concoctions to Pearl and Hester. Hester fears Chillingworth might actually be poisoning her, but drinks his remedy.

Chillingworth forgives Hester for betraying him. He asks her to tell him the identity of the father, but once again she refuses. He then asks Hester to protect his identity by swearing never to identify him as her husband. Hester remains suspicious of Chillingworth and thinks she might be sealing her own doom by agreeing to keep his secret, but does it anyway.

Chapter 5

About three years pass. Hester, now free from prison, decides not to leave Boston. She takes Pearl to live in an abandoned cabin on the outskirts of town.

Hester supports herself as a seamstress. The same people who pay her for her work, including Governor Bellingham, continue to shun her.

Hester grows increasingly lonely. Pearl, her only companion, is a constant reminder of the source of her alienation: sin. Hester is determined to keep the meaning of the scarlet letter a secret from Pearl.

Chapter 6

The narrator describes Pearl as the human manifestation of Hester’s sin. Pearl is filled with a sense of defiance and deviance, and does not fit in among the other children of the community.

Like Hester, Pearl is painfully aware of her isolation. She has an inane sense that Hester’s scarlet letter is linked to their rejection by society. She pleads with her mother to explain the letter’s origin.

The townspeople consider Pearl the physical embodiment of sin, an “imp of evil.”

Chapter 7

Rumors surface that the authorities are planning to take Pearl from Hester because they fear that Pearl is possessed and dangerous to Hester. And if Pearl isn’t possessed, they think she deserves a less sinful mother.

Hester goes to visit Governor Bellingham to inquire about these rumors and to deliver a pair of gloves that she has sewn for him. Children taunt Hester and Pearl on their walk to the Governor’s. Pearl fends them off.

They arrive and find the Governor’s residence decorated with armor and dark formal portraits, relics from Bellingham’s English roots.

At one point, Pearl points out Hester’s distorted reflection in the breastplate of a suit of armor: Hester appears to be completely hidden behind the scarlet letter. Hester seems to feel Pearl’s distance as they gaze in the mirror, and she again suspects that Pearl might be possessed by demons.

Pearl spots a garden with soil too hard to support the “ornamental gardening” popular in England, but which contains some rose bushes. Pearl begs for a rose just as the Governor approaches with other gentlemen.
Chapter 9

As Dimmesdale’s health worsens and he is seen often with his hand over his heart, Chillingworth treats Dimmesdale and soon the two move in together.

The narrator likens Chillingworth’s touch to Satan and sees something there that gives him joy. He attributes his illness to his secret, but Dimmesdale’s condition may stem from stress caused by some kind of secret. He tries to find out this secret, which other townspeople reported seeing a letter “A” formed by a meteor, which they took to stand for “angel” and to mean the dead governor has ascended to heaven.

One day, Chillingworth and Dimmesdale notice Hester and Pearl in the cemetery outside Dimmesdale’s home. Pearl is playing on the headstones and Chillingworth throws one of the burs she is carrying toward Dimmesdale. She tells Hester that they should leave since the Black Man has possessed Dimmesdale and will get them too.

Chillingworth recognizes the effect of secret sins. He hides things too, and becomes an actual “leech” feeding off Dimmesdale’s sin.

Chapter 10

Seven years have now passed since Pearl’s birth. Hester’s life has become more accepted by the community, and the embroidered scarlet letter has evolved into a “symbol of her calling,” not just her sin.

Nonetheless, Hester still lives on the outskirts of town, her hard life has stolen her beauty and spirit, and she now dwells in the realm of thought and solitude, not passion. She doubts whether her own life is worth living, and contemplates murdering Pearl and then committing suicide.

Hester decides that she must help Dimmesdale by confessing that Chillingworth was her husband, thereby revealing the vengeful motive behind his harsh treatment of Dimmesdale.

Chapter 11

Convinced that Dimmesdale is Pearl’s father, Chillingworth embarks on a campaign to make his patient as miserable as possible. Dimmesdale continues to suffer greatly and comes to hate Chillingworth for mistreating him.

Seven years have now passed since Pearl’s birth. Hester says she must tell Dimmesdale about Chillingworth. He responds that their fate, a “black flower,” is no longer in anyone’s hands. He apologizes to Hester for not having offered her the love that she requires.

Chapter 12

One night, Dimmesdale mounts the town scaffold where Hester and Pearl once stood to be shamed. He imagines the scene filled with townspeople. He cries out in anguish, but Mr. Wilson, who was walking by in the distance, doesn’t see Dimmesdale.

Chillingworth fakes being a good Puritan. It’s a sin to lie, but lying fools the authorities. The novel’s two worst sinners now live together. Sin feeds sin.

Both Chillingworth and Dimmesdale suffer physically for their inner turmoil. In keeping secrets to hide their sins and conform to social pressure, they cause their bodies, their natures, to wither and die.

Chapter 13

Nature celebrates the scarlet letter. Yet Dimmesdale’s goes with the “arch-fiend.” He’s chosen secret sin over punishment, repentance, and internal truth.

More hypocrisy: Dimmesdale’s sermons against sin get more powerful as his own sins increase, and the Puritans continue to be blind to the sins in their midst. Note how the letter “A” means only what popular opinion says it means.

Chapter 14

The symbol of Hester’s punishment now is a mark of her personal skill as a seamstress.

Hester’s reputation improves, but because of her sin. Puritans say she’ll never reach heaven. By withholding forgiveness, Puritanism makes it pointless for sinners to stop sinning.

Hester, the “sinner” intends to save Dimmesdale, though “innocent” Dimmesdale never tried to save her.

Hester decides to ask Chillingworth to stop tormenting Dimmesdale. When she and Pearl encounter him on a beach near the sea, he tells her that his council has recently discussed allowing her to remove the scarlet letter from her chest. She says the letter should stay until she’s worthy of its removal.

Hester notices that Chillingworth has changed. He’s now a vengeful, vengeful old man. Chillingworth also notes the change, remembering when he was a kind scholar. He says that he’s lost his “human heart.”

Hester tells Chillingworth he holds Dimmesdale’s life in his hands. Chillingworth says he saved Dimmesdale’s life by not revealing his link to Hester from the start. Hester says he would be better off dead than forced to endure Chillingworth’s torture.

Chillingworth admits that he’s become a “fiend.” He blames Hester for his downfall. Hester agrees, pleading with Chillingworth therefore not to blame and abuse Dimmesdale any further.

Hester says she must tell Dimmesdale about Chillingworth. He responds that their fate, a “black flower,” is no longer in anyone’s hands. He apologizes to Hester for not having offered her the love that would have prevented their collective ruin.

Hester and Pearl, returning from the deathbed of the colony’s first governor, do spot Dimmesdale, and join him on the scaffold. Her eyes alive with “witchcraft,” Pearl asks Dimmesdale to appear on the scaffold with them in front of everyone. Dimmesdale says he will only do that on “judgment day.”

A meteor lights up the sky in what Dimmesdale thinks is the shape of an “A.” Pearl notices Chillingworth watching them. Chillingworth, looking like an “arch-fiend,” urges Dimmesdale to get down from the scaffold. He and Dimmesdale return home.

Chapter 15

Hester removes the letter only on her own terms. Her remark about being worthy of its removal is a sarcastic jab at the Puritans, who seek to define her worthiness.

Chillingworth’s secrets and his quest for revenge have made him inhuman, unable to forgive, and miserable.

Chillingworth, and other Puritans, equates reputation with life. But Hester knows prioritizing reputation over the soul is killing Dimmesdale.

Unlike anyone else in the novel, Hester is “true.” She admits her mistakes and sins and takes responsibility for them.

Prisons are black flowers because they arise out of sin, which they’re intended to contain. Similarly, Chillingworth intended to punish sin, but has instead become a sinful himself.

Dimmesdale hides behind religion (“judgment day”) to evade Pearl’s invitation to escape from his secrets. “Witchcraft” offers salvation while religion offers sin.
Chapter 15
As Chillingworth departs, Hester thinks that though it’s a sin, she hates Chillingworth for tricking her into thinking she’d be happy as his wife.

She rejoins Pearl by the seaside. Pearl has arranged seaweed to form a letter “A” on her own chest. She pleads with Hester to tell her what the scarlet letter means, and asks if Hester wears it for the same reason Dimmesdale covers his heart with his hand.

Hester lies and says she wears the letter because of its beautiful gold thread. Pearl, knowing better, sees the real reason, and Hester threatens to punish her.

Hester prioritizes her happiness over fear of sin.

Pearl senses that understanding the letter’s signification is crucial to understanding herself and her connection to Dimmesdale.

After advocating that Chillingworth be honest, Hester is “false” to her daughter.

Chapter 16
Hester plans to intercept Dimmesdale along a forest path as he returns to Boston on his way back from visiting an apostle.

As Hester waits for Dimmesdale, Pearl asks to hear the story of the Black Man, a nickname for the devil. Pearl adds that the Black Man haunts the forest with a book that his converts must sign in blood. The Black Man then places a mark on his followers’ bosoms.

Hester asks how Pearl heard this story and she responds that an old woman told her the Black Man put the scarlet letter on her mother. Eager to settle the matter, Hester confirms the false story of the letter’s origin.

Dimmesdale approaches. He appears weak, and walks with his hand over his heart, where Dimmesdale’s habit of covering his heart.

In the forest, in nature, Hester can be honest with Dimmesdale.

Pearl’s fascination with the Black Man is motivated by the secrets around the scarlet letter. In this way, suppression creates what is being suppressed.

Like Dimmesdale’s lie about his glove on the scaffold, Hester uses the devil to hide her sin.

Pearl has identified the link between her father’s sin and her mother’s sin.

Chapter 17
Hester and Dimmesdale meet in the forest and hold hands. Dimmesdale says life with a scarlet letter would be preferable to his life of deception, since Hester is the only person with whom he can be himself. The rest is emptiness, falsehood, and death.

Hester reveals to Dimmesdale that Chillingworth was her husband. Dimmesdale, furious, blames her for his suffering. But he then forgives her and says Chillingworth’s sin was far worse than theirs.

Dimmesdale says living under Chillingworth’s control is worse than death, but he sees no way out. Hester tells him to consider a life beyond Boston, in the safety and anonymity of Europe. Dimmesdale says he lacks the strength and courage to venture out alone. Hester says he wouldn’t have to go alone.

Dimmesdale knows that his secret sin and the split identity it creates in him is actually killing him.

Hester and Dimmesdale kept secrets to protect themselves. Chillingworth kept secrets in order to harm others.

Hester gives Dimmesdale a solution to save himself that isn’t confession: leave Boston and the Puritans with her. But note that this solution involves running from secrets, not confessing them.

Chapter 18
Dimmesdale decides to flee Boston with Hester. He calls her his “angel” and says he’s been renewed. Hester flings away her scarlet letter and feels an enormous swell of relief.

Dimmesdale and Hester discuss Pearl, whom Hester says she barely understands. Pearl, meanwhile, has been playing alone in the forest, where she fits in well among the wild animals. Hester calls her to come meet Dimmesdale, her father.

In the forest, free from the pressures of Puritan society, Dimmesdale and Hester escape their sins and are free to love.

Unity with nature shows purity. The implication is that Pearl, and therefore her parents’ affair, are not sinful against God. They only sin against Puntanim.

Chapter 19
Dimmesdale says he feared that Pearl’s resemblance to him would give away his secret—the narrator says Pearl is a “living hieroglyphic.” Yet Pearl refuses to come to her parents when they call. Hester attributes her reluctance to the absence of the scarlet letter on her bosom. Hester puts the letter back on and Pearl accepts her.

Pearl asks if Dimmesdale will return with them hand in hand to town. Hester says he won’t join them in public yet. Dimmesdale kisses Pearl. She runs to the brook to wash off his kiss.

Pearl won’t accept Dimmesdale as her father unless he will publicly accept her. Pearl, at one with nature, always favors honesty and openness.

Chapter 20
Hester and Dimmesdale agree to flee with Pearl to Europe. As Hester makes plans for them to leave on a ship bound for England in four days, Dimmesdale feels changes coming over him, including the urge to speak blasphemously to strangers. He encounters Mistress Hibbins. She suggests they go to see the Black Man.

At home, Dimmesdale tells Chillingworth that the “free air” outside has done him so much good that he no longer needs the help of his medications. Chillingworth suspects instead that Dimmesdale talked with Hester, but feigns relief that his remedies have finally helped restore Dimmesdale’s health.

Dimmesdale throws the draft of his most important sermon into the fire and starts from scratch.

Dimmesdale’s decision to flee has changed him, and even Mistress Hibbins recognizes his newfound freedom. But note that while his repression is breaking down, he doesn’t act on it.

Chapter 21
It’s inauguration day for the new governor. Hester and Pearl await the procession of government officials, and stand near a bunch of Indians (“painted barbarians”) and some crew members (“desperadoes”) from the vessel that Hester will board with Dimmesdale.

The narrator remarks that the Puritan style of celebration lacks the grandness and gaiety that events like this had in England.

Chillingworth walks over to and converses with the commander of the vessel bound for England. The commander leaves his side and walks by Hester. He recognizes her and says that Chillingworth will also be aboard the ship. Hester looks across the crowd and sees Chillingworth smile menacingly at her.

The derogatory descriptions of the Indians and crew members make clear the intolerance of the Puritans toward outsiders.

Puritans are always depicted in the novel as somber and severe.

Chillingworth has been devouring by hate and the need for revenge. He is no longer human. His secrets and lies in the service of righteous revenge have made him worse than any “witch.”

Chapter 22
Dimmesdale appears in the procession of officials and looks more energetic than ever before. Pearl barely recognizes him as the man who kissed her in the forest. Hester tells Pearl not to mention the forest to the town. When Hester and Dimmesdale see each other no gesture of recognition passes between them. Hester fears that the bond she felt had been restored in the forest was an illusion.

Mistress Hibbins approaches Hester. She says she can always tell a servant of the Black Man, and that both Hester and Dimmesdale are such servants. Hibbins also compares Hester’s scarlet letter to Dimmesdale’s habit of covering his heart.

Pearl asks Mistress Hibbins if she has seen what lies beneath Dimmesdale’s hand. Mistress Hibbins invites her to ride to see the Black Man (who she calls Pearl’s father) to learn what Dimmesdale conceals.

The Scarlet Letter flips conventional ideas about religion and the occult. The occult stands for honesty, while Puntanim creates repressed fears.

Pearl is the daughter of the devil in the sense that she is unconstrained by Puritanism, not in the sense that she’s evil.
Some Indians standing in the gathered crowd think Hester's scarlet letter is a mark of distinction.

Chapter 23

Dimmesdale awes the crowd with a powerful sermon that predicts Puritan New England will flourish as a chosen land of God. The crowd thinks that Dimmesdale's performance is made even more powerful by the weakness that has once again settled on him and made it clear he was verging on death.

After his triumphant sermon, Dimmesdale sees Hester and Pearl in front of the scaffold. He asks them to approach him at the scaffold. Chillingworth warns Dimmesdale not to "blacken" his name.

On the scaffold, Dimmesdale turns to Hester and says: "Is this not better than what we dreamed of in the forest?" He tells her God is merciful, and begs her to let him take responsibility for his shame. Supported by Hester and Pearl, Dimmesdale turns to the crowd and announces that he is guilty of the same sin for which they have punished Hester. As Chillingworth looks on in despair, Dimmesdale tears away his clothing to reveal a scarlet letter carved into his breast.

Dimmesdale falls to the floor and asks Pearl for a kiss. She kisses him and cries, and narrator says her tears were a pledge that "she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor forever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it."

The scarlet letter contains no innate badge of shame.

The Puritans think Dimmesdale's sermon is inspired by God, but remain blind to his sin. Meanwhile, Dimmesdale now realizes that he is going to die.

This is the third scene on the scaffold. Dimmesdale has gone from denial to secret confession to public confession.

By protecting his reputation, Dimmesdale sentenced himself to suffering for worse than the public punishment he would have shared with Hester. By confessing, he escapes the prison he built for himself, and the one Chillingworth built for him.

Dimmesdale's confession couldn't save his life, but it does save Pearl. It connects her to humanity by revealing "human joy and sorrow."

Chapter 24

People came up with various explanations for the origin of Dimmesdale's scarlet letter. Some thought Dimmesdale carved it himself, as a penance. Others that Chillingworth, through magic poisons, brought it into being. Still others thought it developed naturally, from remorse. The town authorities stated that there had been no letter on his skin at all, and that Dimmesdale confessed not for a personal sin, but simply to teach his flock that all men are born sinners.

The narrator says the story he's told has one moral: be true, and show the world your worst, or at least, "some trait whereby the worst may be inferred."

After Dimmesdale's death, Chillingworth lost his vitality and died within a year, leaving Pearl a share of his property in England and New England. No one knew for sure what happened to Pearl, but clues point to her having married a man, for love, in Europe.

Hester returned years later to her cabin in Boston. She lived there for many years before her death and still wore the scarlet letter, which had taken on its own legend over time. She was buried next to Dimmesdale. Their shared tombstone bore a single scarlet letter on a field of black.

Hester tells Dimmesdale they will meet again in the afterlife. Though Dimmesdale is not so sure, he dies crying out that God is merciful and thanking Him for putting him through the terrible trials and ordeals that led to this moment, his confession. The watching crowd murmers in awe.

The Puritan God is a punisher of sin. But by confessing, which none of the hypocritical Puritans do, Dimmesdale discovers the mercy of God and dies content, thankful even for his suffering.

Important Quotes

Chapter 1 Quotes

On one side of the portal, and rooted almost at the threshold, was a wild rose-bush, covered, in this month of June, with its delicate gems, which might be imagined to offer their fragrance and fragile beauty to the prisoner as he went in, and to the condemned criminal as he came forth to his doom, in token that the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to him.

Chapter 2 Quotes

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 luxuriate of fancy, that it ... 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.

Chapter 3 Quotes

When he found the eyes of Hester Prynne fastened on his own, and saw that she appeared to recognize him, he slowly and calmly raised his finger, made a gesture with it in the air, and laid it on his lips.

Chapter 8 Quotes

After putting her finger in her mouth, with many ungracious refusals to answer good Mr. Wilson's questions, the child finally announced that she had not been made at all, but had been plucked by her mother off the bush of wild roses that grew by the prison-door.

Chapter 16 Quotes

"Mother," said little Pearl, "the sunshine does not love you. It runs away and hides itself, because it is afraid of something on your bosom.... I am but a child. It will not flee from me, for I wear nothing on my bosom yet!" "Nor ever will, my child, I hope," said Hester. "And why not, mother?" asked Pearl, stopping short, just at the beginning of her race. "Will not it come of its own accord, when I am a woman grown?"

Chapter 18 Quotes

But Hester Prynne, with a mind of native courage and activity, and for so long a period not merely estranged, but outlawed, from society, had habituated herself to such latitude of speculation as was altogether foreign to the clergyman. She had wandered, without rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness.... The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread. Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers,—stern and wild ones,—and they had made her strong, but taught her much amiss.

Chapter 22 Quotes

"Mother," said [Pearl], "was that the same minister that kissed me by the brook?" "Hold thy peace, dear little Pearl!" whispered her mother. "We must not always talk in the market-place of what happens to us in the forest.

Chapter 24 Quotes

But there was a more real life for Hester Prynne here, in New England, than in that unknown region where Pearl had found a home. Here had been her sin; here, her sorrow; and here was yet to be her penitence. She had returned, therefore, and resumed,—of her own free will, for not the sternest magistrate of that iron period would have imposed it,—resumed the symbol of which we have related so dark a tale. Never afterwards did it quit her bosom. But ... the scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world's scorn and bitterness, and became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, and yet with reverence, too.
The LitCharts ThemeTracker is a mini-version of the entire LitChart. The ThemeTracker provides a quick timeline-style rundown of all the important plot points and allows you to track the themes throughout the work at a glance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Chapter</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Custom House</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>- The narrator finds the <strong>scarlet letter</strong> and Jonathan Pue's story in the Custom House.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- The narrator loses his job at the Custom House, and is pleased to now have the time to devote to writing the <strong>Scarlet Letter</strong>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- A crowd of Puritans gather outside a prison near Boston.</td>
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<td>- The narrator calls the prison a &quot;black flower of civilized society&quot; and then describe a wild rose bush growing next to the prison.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Waiting for <strong>Hester Prynne</strong> to emerge, some Puritans comment that her pastor, Reverend Dimmesdale, must be ashamed to have her in his congregation.</td>
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<td>- <strong>Hester</strong> emerges from prison carrying the infant <strong>Pearl</strong> and wearing a <strong>scarlet letter A</strong>. She looks proud and beautiful.</td>
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<td>- <strong>Hester</strong> is &quot;shamed&quot; by being forced to stand on the scaffold.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- <strong>Hester</strong> thinks of the past to endure the shaming. The image of a misshapen scholar, her husband, appears to her.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- <strong>Hester</strong> realizes that the <strong>scarlet letter</strong> and her baby, <strong>Pearl</strong>, are her only reality.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- <strong>Hester</strong> recognizes <strong>Chillingworth</strong> in the crowd.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- <strong>Chillingworth</strong> is horrified to recognize <strong>Hester</strong>. He quickly places his fingers to his lips to silence her so that she does not identify him as her husband.</td>
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<td>- <strong>Chillingworth</strong> learns from a man in the crowd that the man who fathered <strong>Hester's</strong> child is a mystery. Chillingworth predicts that the man will be revealed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Dimmesdale demands that <strong>Hester</strong> reveal the father of her baby. Hester refuses. She is returned to her cell.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- <strong>Hester</strong> poses as a doctor, <strong>Chillingworth</strong> visits <strong>Hester</strong> in prison. Hester refuses to tell him the name of the man who fathered her child, but does promise to keep secret Chillingworth's own identity as her husband.</td>
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<td>- Three years pass. <strong>Hester</strong> and <strong>Pearl</strong> move to an abandoned cabin outside Boston.</td>
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<td>- <strong>Hester</strong> works as a seamstress. The same people who employ her, continue to shun her. She gets more and more lonely.</td>
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<td>- <strong>Pearl</strong> is too deviant and defiant to fit in among the other children.</td>
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<td>- Pearl recognizes that the <strong>scarlet letter</strong> is associated with her isolation, and begs <strong>Hester</strong> to explain it's meaning to her. Hester refuses.</td>
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<td>- <strong>Hester</strong> learns the government plans to take <strong>Pearl</strong> from her and goes to visit <strong>Governor Bellingham</strong>.</td>
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<td>- <strong>Hester</strong> also brings a pair of gloves that she has sewn for the governor.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- <strong>Dimmesdale</strong> and <strong>Chillingworth</strong> attend the meeting with <strong>Hester</strong>, along with <strong>Governor Bellingham</strong>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- <strong>Dimmesdale</strong> intercedes on <strong>Hester's</strong> behalf, and convinces the <strong>Governor</strong> not to take <strong>Pearl</strong> from <strong>Hester</strong>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- <strong>Chillingworth</strong> notes the unusual passion with which <strong>Dimmesdale</strong> spoke to the <strong>Governor</strong>.</td>
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<td>- As <strong>Hester</strong> and <strong>Pearl</strong> leave the meeting, <strong>Mistress Hibbins</strong> invites her to come to a witch's meeting in the forest. Hester declines.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- <strong>Dimmesdale's</strong> health worsens. He often walks around with his hand over his heart. <strong>Chillingworth</strong> serves as his live-in physician.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- While treating <strong>Dimmesdale</strong>, <strong>Chillingworth</strong> changes from a kind, elderly, and somewhat misshapen looking gentleman into an ugly, evil old man.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- <strong>Chillingworth</strong> suspects a secret is the cause of <strong>Dimmesdale's</strong> bad health. Dimmesdale refuses to reveal it.</td>
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<td>- One day when <strong>Dimmesdale</strong> falls asleep, <strong>Chillingworth</strong> pushes aside his shirt and sees something on Dimmesdale's chest that gives him joy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- <strong>Chillingworth</strong> suspects that <strong>Dimmesdale</strong> is <strong>Pearl's</strong> father and resolves to make Dimmesdale as miserable as possible.</td>
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<td>- <strong>Dimmesdale's</strong> sermons, which condemn sin, grow more and more passionate, winning him great favor in the congregation. Meanwhile, Dimmesdale hates himself.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- One night, <strong>Dimmesdale</strong> mounts the town scaffold where <strong>Hester</strong> was shamed three years earlier. <strong>Hester</strong> and <strong>Pearl</strong> spot him as they pass by, and join him there.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- A meteor lights up the sky in a letter &quot;A,&quot; <strong>Pearl</strong> notices <strong>Chillingworth</strong> watching them, and <strong>Dimmesdale</strong> leaves with Chillingworth. Dimmesdale's sermon the next day is his most powerful ever.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Seven years have passed since <strong>Pearl</strong> was born. <strong>Hester</strong> is more accepted in the community, but still lives on its outskirts, and she contemplates suicide regularly.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- <strong>Hester</strong> decides she must help <strong>Dimmesdale</strong> escape from <strong>Chillingworth's</strong> cruel treatment of him.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- <strong>Hester</strong> confronts <strong>Chillingworth</strong> about his abuse of <strong>Dimmesdale</strong>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- <strong>Hester</strong> notes how <strong>Chillingworth</strong> has transformed into a wretched old man. <strong>Chillingworth</strong> agrees, saying that he has lost his &quot;human heart.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>- <strong>Chillingworth</strong> wishes he had given <strong>Hester</strong> the love that would have saved them all from this doom.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Pearl shapes seaweed into the form of an A on her chest and demands that Hester explain the scarlet letter’s meaning. Hester lies that she wears the letter for it’s beautiful thread. When Pearl doesn’t believe Hester, Hester threatens to punish her.

While waiting in the forest to intercept Dimmesdale, Pearl tells Hester that she heard the Black Man put the scarlet letter on Hester. Hester agrees. Dimmesdale walking in the forest. Because Dimmesdale is covering his heart when they meet, Pearl assumes that the Black Man has put his mark on Dimmesdale as well.

Hester tells Dimmesdale about Chillingworth. Dimmesdale at first blames Hester for not telling him sooner, but then says that Chillingworth’s sin is more grave. Hester suggests that she, Dimmesdale, and Pearl escape Boston and go to Europe.

Dimmesdale decides to flee to Europe with Hester. Hester throws away the scarlet letter and calls to Pearl, who is playing nearby, to come meet her father.

Pearl refuses to come until Hester puts the scarlet letter back on. Pearl asks if Dimmesdale will accompany them hand-in-hand back to town. Hester says not yet. Pearl washes off Dimmesdale’s kiss.


Among the crowd gathered for the inauguration day of the new governor, Hester learns that Chillingworth is making plans to take the same ship to England on which she has booked passage.

Dimmesdale ignores Hester and Pearl as he walks by in the procession of officials. Pearl says that Dimmesdale looks totally different from how he looked in the forest. Hester tells Pearl not to mention the forest in town.

Mistress Hibbins tells Hester that she knows that Hester and Dimmesdale are servants of the Black Man. She also says that the Black Man is Pearl’s father.

Dimmesdale’s sermon predicts that puritan New England will flourish and become powerful. Then Dimmesdale, to Chillingworth’s dismay, calls Hester and Pearl up to the scaffold where he is preaching. Dimmesdale confesses his sin, and reveals a scarlet letter carved into his breast, before collapsing.

Pearl kisses Dimmesdale. The narrator says that now Pearl will “grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor forever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it.”

Dimmesdale calls out that God is merciful and thanks Him for providing the trials that led Dimmesdale to confession.

Chillingworth dies with the year, and leaves his small estate to Pearl. Pearl marries for love in Europe.

Hester lives for many years, still wearing her scarlet letter. When she dies, she is buried next to Dimmesdale under the same tombstone.