

# Scarlet letter literary criticism



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## Scarlet Letter Literary Criticism

All great stories have thorough reports from several different literary critics, what do they have to say on *The Scarlet Letter*? *The Scarlet Letter* in the nineteenth century is comparable to early twentieth century and late twentieth century criticism.

Early nineteenth century critics think the story was a tremendous work of art. A “Review of New Books” thought the story is “a genuine native romance” (Ripley 295). This is shown through the struggle of Hester and Arthur to have a secret love affair and find time to see each other periodically throughout the story. Ripley believes *The Scarlet Letter* is his greatest work by “imposing splendor of portative” (295). Hawthorne is a master at telling this story very haunted at times. Ripley ponders, “Roger Chillingworth is depicted with such fearful directness and vigor that it is his informal presence that must long haunt the chamber of memory” (295). The critic feels that Hawthorne would move the audience to a sad place as Chillingworth haunted Dimmesdale. Hawthorne’s work is even considered better than the highly famous Edgar Allen Poe. Ripley states, “Hawthorne makes his tragedies with a wonderful insight and skill, to which the intellect of Poe was a stranger” (295). This is a great compliment for Hawthorne, as Poe has some great dark stories. But its true, because it seems like this story was always gloomy. Just when you think things are going to get good at the end, when Dimmesdale is in a good mood, he quickly gets sick again. This was very interesting, because it is a different twist to the normal happy story. The people in the story as a whole are spoken of. The people in the story were more symbolic than just a character, “very picturesquely

arranged,” mainly because the story isn’t about them, but what they stand for (James 29). For instance, Pearl is the living sin. Nineteenth century criticism is positive to the story.

Early twentieth century criticism continues what took place in nineteenth century criticism, to be very optimistic about the story, but takes a deeper look into the main characters. Mark Van Doven points out the greatness of the characters. He explains Pearl in a short, but fascinating way, “ Pearl has something supernatural about her. She may even be the devil’s child (Van Doren 135). Pearl, the living sin, haunts Hester at times with her tricky questions. Van Doren says of Dimmesdale, “ Dimmesdale’s purpose, still do not give him peace. The blood comes, but not his soul, for there is no penitence. He tortures, but cannot purify himself” (131). He is a sad character in this story. It seems like all he does is suffer and suffer. Either way, Arthur would have been tortured, either physically or mentally. If he came out early on, they would have killed him, but he kept it in, so he suffered mentally. Hawthorne did this magically. Van Doven speaks highest on Hawthorne’s work of Hester, “ Hester becomes a heroine, almost a goddess, into when the character every other woman in Hawthorne flows” (130). She is ridiculed so much during the story, but lived her life sewing elaborate dresses. After Arthur’s death, people would finally talk to her again. Hester is a passionate woman, shown through “ her state of excitement feeding in frenzy, in the prison after her first exposure to the crowd” (131). She cries for a while there, after being so strong on the scaffold. Critics of the early twentieth century were constructive of The Scarlet Letter.

Late twentieth century criticism spoke of only good things of the Scarlet Letter as well, as they depicted the interesting character of Chillingworth. Neilson talks of Hawthorne's character work, Neilson believed Chillingworth's power died when Arthur died, forcing him to shrivel up and pass away quickly. Neilson talks of Roger, "Chillingworth is a dabbler in black magic, a porche where clearly predates his animal in Boston" (Neilson 273). He is a wicked man who sinned more than he had to to make Dimmesdale's life a living hell. More of Chillingworth is explained, "he is the wronged husband, but ironically the most condensed sinner. That is because he is the only one of the three who deliberately chooses evil" (273). Roger is the worst of the three, and was never loved as well. Late twentieth century spoke highly of The Scarlet Letter too.

All three time periods have critics that were upbeat on The Scarlet Letter. This shows that The Scarlet Letter is a well written story. Seeing that critics from late nineteenth century, early twentieth century, and late twentieth century are all positive.

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