

The scarlet letter by nathaniel hawthorne

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne was published in 1850. It was written in the Romantic literary period of American Literature. A literary movement called Transcendentalism was thriving during the 1830s and 1840s, primarily in Massachusetts. They believed in the power of the human mind to shape and determine experience. The Scarlet letter creates a harsh picture of the Puritans, a religious group that controlled a English settlement in Massachusetts in the late seventeenth-century.

Protagonist:

The protagonist in The Scarlet Letter is Hester Prynne. She is the mother of Pearl. Hester must wear the scarlet letter “ A” on herself as punishment of her adulterous affair with Arthur Dimmesdale, who is the towns minister. Hester is married to Roger Chillingworth, but as she was waiting for his arrival back home, she engaged in the adulterous affair, which lead to Pearl’s birth.

Antagonist:

The antagonist in The Scarlet Letter is Roger Chillingworth. Roger is Hester’s husband, a scholar who is much older than Hester, sent Hester ahead to America, and Roger never made it to Boston. The majority opinion is that he got lost of sea. Roger arrives home on the day that his wife is publicly shamed and forced to wear the scarlet letter. Roger wants revenge on Pearl’s father, who has committed adultery with his wife.

Plot Summary:

The Scarlet Letter opens with a preamble about how the book came to be written. The story begins in Boston, in the seventeenth-century, in a Puritan settlement. A young woman, Hester Prynne, is directed from town prison, in arms is her infant daughter, Pearl, and the scarlet letter "A" on her chest. The scarlet letter "A" stands for adultery, which is the sin Hester has committed. Hester's husband returns to town, and tells his identity to be Roger Chillingworth, and is hungry for revenge on Hester's lover. Roger realizes that Arthur Dimmesdale is Hester's lover. Roger harasses him for the next seven years, and Arthur is sick with guilt. Hester tells Arthur who Roger actually is, and that they plan to settle back in England. Arthur is still feeling guilty, and then develops a red mark on his chest. Arthur cancels his plans, and confesses to his sin. When standing on the scaffold in front of the entire town, he rips open his shirt to display the red mark on his chest before dying. Roger also dies, and leaves his fortunes to Pearl. Pearl and Hester can now leave and head back to England. In the end, Hester goes back to the colony and happily continues to wear her letter. Later, Hester dies, and is buried next to Arthur, with the letter "A" marked on her grave.

Key Themes:

One key theme in The Scarlet Letter is revenge, as Roger Chillingworth wants revenge on Arthur. Another theme is women and femininity.

Significant Literary Elements:

The Scarlet Letter takes place in Boston, in the seventeenth-century, in a Puritan settlement. The scarlet letter symbolizes adultery, hard work, sin,

charity, righteousness, and grace. The forest and wilderness symbolizes freedom and emotional escape, the prison door symbolizes a place of sin compared to God's grace. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the unnamed narrator uses a third person perspective. Literary elements that Hawthorne included in *The Scarlet Letter* are irony, symbolism, and imagery. One symbol is the scaffolding that Hester stands on, that represents Puritan hypocrisy. In the novel it states, "The same platform or scaffold, black and weather-stained with the storm or sunshine of seven long years, and foot-worn, too, with the tread of many culprits who had since ascended it, remained standing beneath the balcony of the meeting house" (Hawthorne 143). Another literary element used in the novel is irony, the minister, Dimmesdale, commits a frowned upon sin in spite of being supposedly holy. The novel states, "...he was often observed, on any slight alarm or other sudden accident, to put his hand over his heart, with first a flush and then a paleness, indicative of pain" (Hawthorne 119).

PART 2:

Journal Entries:

Entry 1:

"A writer of story-books! What kind of a business in life,—what mode of glorifying God, or being serviceable to mankind in his day and generation,—may that be? Why, the degenerate fellow might as well have been a fiddler!" Such are the compliments bandied between my great-grandsires and myself,

across the gulf of time! And yet, let them scorn me as they will, strong traits of their nature have intertwined themselves with mine.” (Hawthorne 21)

This passage comes from the Introductory Sketch of *The Scarlet Letter*. The narrator explains how he came to write his version of Hester Prynne’s story. Part of his motives in the story is personal, he comes from the original Puritan settlers of Massachusetts. The narrator both proclaims and and withstands Puritan principles. His heart tells him to write, but the Puritan side of him sees the foolishness to do one’s utmost. The narrator finds Hester interesting because she represents the past, but also because her encounters represent his own predicaments. For the narrator, writing about Hester’s story turns into an understanding of himself. This is important because we find out why the narrator wrote *The Scarlet Letter* and what the purpose of the story is.

Entry 2:

Hester Prynne’s character is dynamic, meaning it changes throughout the course of the book. She is the main character in *The Scarlet Letter*, whom changes a great deal throughout the story. She is a dynamic character because in the beginning of the story she is a proud women struggling with in her situation in life. As the book progresses, she gains confidence, strength, and dignity. Hester learns to assist her town and community without bitterness, to make her situation better, and to provide for her new child. Hester’s changing character can also been defined in the changing of the townspeople towards her. At the beginning, they mocked, judged, and declined her. As time passed, the townspeople learned to accept her, and

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appreciate her services she does for the community and her kindness.

Before the novel even began, we knew that she was a beautiful women with a strong mind. Hester followed the instinct in her heart, rather than society's expectations of behavior. We can infer that Hester is very true, selfless, and loyal due to her refusal to her refusal to reveal her baby's father. She is willing to carry the suffering for her sin alone, which tells us she is not bitter, or revengeful.

Entry 3:

In *The Scarlet Letter*, symbols appear throughout the book. Hawthorne uses many different concrete objects to represent a deeper meaning. The chief symbol in the story is the scarlet letter "A", which symbolizes Hester's adultery. The letter "A" appears in several forms and places. It's the letter on Hester's chest that she must wear for the remainder of her life, due to the sin of adultery. The scarlet letter is meant to be a symbol of shame, but in fact becomes a strong symbol of identity to Hester. The scarlet letter "A" is made of red cloth, and is beautifully embroidered. The scarlet letter "A" was originally intended to stand for adultery, but eventually comes to stand for able, which marks her as a person of importance. Hester wins the townspeople's respect and becomes known as a generous helper and a kind person.

METEOR

As Dimmesdale, Hester, and Pearl stand on the scaffold, a meteor traces out an "A" in the dark night sky. The meteor for Dimmesdale implies that he

should wear a mark of shame just like Hester Prynne does. The community interprets the meteor in a different way, thinking it stands for “angel” marking Governor Winthrop’s entry into heaven. The Puritans usually looked to symbols to confirm divine sentiments. However in this novel, symbols are taken to mean what the individual wants them to mean. The meteor scene emphasizes two different uses of symbols, which are literary and Puritan.

PEARL

Pearl’s main purpose within the novel is as a symbol. Pearl is a living, breathing version of her mother’s scarlet letter, and is also a constant reminder of her mother’s sin. She is the consequence of committing the sin of adultery. Even as a reminder of Hester’s sin, she is more than a punishment to Hester, Pearl is also a blessing. Not only does she represent sin, but also the essential spirit and passion that caused that sin. Therefore, Pearl’s life gives her mother reason to live, picking her up when she wants to give up. Pearl can only become fully “human” after Dimmesdale is said to be her father. Until that happens, Pearl functions in a symbolic position as the reminder of an unsolved mystery.

FOREST:

The forest symbolizes Nature, in both its lighter and darker aspects. When reading the novel it becomes very obvious that there is a contrast between the setting of the forest and the setting of the town. The forest symbolizes a dark, mysterious place where urges live and is also where affairs take place, and to be kept secret. The forest is explained to be dim, gloomy and

full of dark shadows, while in the cloudy sky, there appears threatening storms. When the rays of sunlight come down on Pearl, but do not make it to Hester, it is symbolic for Hester's inability to find happiness or warmth. The invading darkness is suggestive of the dreary gloom in her life. The darkness disappears when she meets with Dimmesdale and plans to leave Boston with him. Hester throws away the scarlet letter and lets down her hair, as a symbol of freedom. A stream of sunshine lights up the forest, eliminating the darkness.

Entry 4:

"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. . . . 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. . . . "Will it not come of its own accord, when I am a woman grown?". (Hawthorne 175)

This quote, taken from Chapter 16, "A Forest Walk", means that Hester experiences more dark, sad times than light and happy times. It was expected that Hester would live most of her life in darkness because she committed the sin of adultery. Pearl says "...afraid of something on your bosom..", she means that the scarlet letter on her mom's chest is something full of darkness, not something light and happy. The sun will not flee from Pearl because she has not done anything wrong. Pearl has not sinned, therefore she can catch the light of the sun. This quotation is important

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because it conveys the idea that Pearl is often aware of things that others don't see, and in this quote she recognizes the "A" on her mother's bosom as a lack of sunshine in her mother's life. When Pearl says, "Will it not come of its own accord, when I am a woman grown", she suggesting that all women wear a scarlet letter. Of course Pearl has noticed that the other women in her town do not wear scarlet letters. Pearl's question suggests that sin-which the scarlet letter represents-is an destined part of being a fully-developed human being.

Entry 5:

"What she compelled herself to believe-what, finally, she reasoned upon as her motive for continuing a resident of New England-was half a truth, and half a self-delusion. Here, she said to herself, had been the scene of her guilt, and here should be the scene of her earthly punishment; and so, perchance, the torture of her daily shame would at length purge her soul and work out another purity than that which she had lost; more saintlike, because the result of martyrdom.

Hester Prynne, therefore, did not flee."

Hester Prynne had many options to escape her punishment, and live a better life. She could have fled the village, to hide from her sin. Even though Hester could have easily left, she did not, she stayed. Hester dealt with the consequences of her actions, and because of that she actually changed tremendously for the better. She learned to embrace it and live with it. I agree with Hester for staying in town and owning up to her sins, and living

with the consequences. Not only did she live with the consequences, but they changed her so much, that she became a totally new woman.

PART 3:

Personal Reflection:

There are many lessons that I gained from the novel, *The Scarlet Letter*. One of the bigger lessons learned is that you can't run away from your sins. This is seen when Hester and Dimmesdale plan to run away and escape punishment. The novel states "That this physician here-Chillingworth, he calls himself-is minded to try my cabin-fare with you?". This passage shows that Dimmesdale and Hester try to do the desperate thing and try to escape. The lesson trying to express is that someone can't escape from their sins by running away.