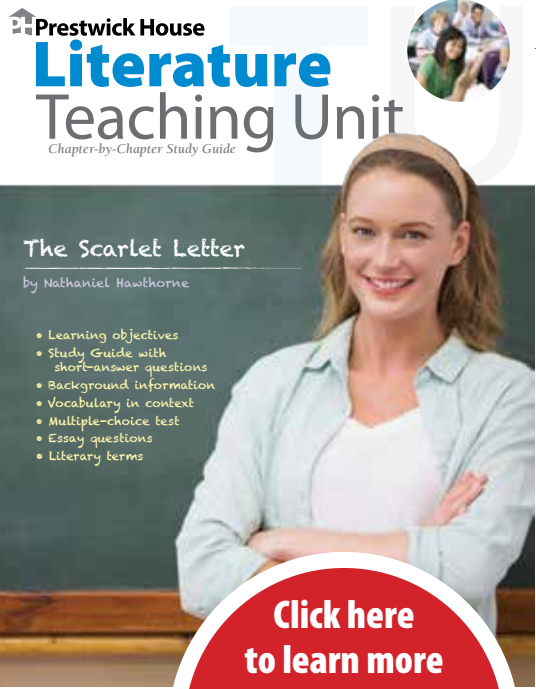




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by Nathaniel Hawthorne

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The Scarlet Letter

Note to the Teacher

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) was born in Salem, Massachusetts with the name Nathaniel Hathorne. His ancestors were wealthy, influential Puritans; one, William Hathorne, became a judge who persecuted Quakers, and another, Judge John Hathorne, sentenced many people to death for alleged witchcraft. Hawthorne was obsessed with the sins of these ancestors who reflected the religious intolerance of a puritanical society, and he even went as far as to add a *w* to his last name to avoid association with his lineage.

In 1850, after having lost his job as a customs surveyor, Hawthorne published *The Scarlet Letter*, which received widespread critical acclaim. In the novel, he effectively employs the depiction of oppressive Puritan society as a way to unearth the nature of humankind as a whole. The sins of Hester Prynne, Roger Chillingworth, and Reverend Dimmesdale, though specific, represent universal human experiences and faults.

All references come from the Prestwick House Literary Touchstone Press Edition of *The Scarlet Letter*, copyright 2005.

The Scarlet Letter

Terms and Definitions

Antagonist – the person or force that is in conflict with, or opposes, the protagonist;

Example: Nurse Ratched opposes McMurphy throughout *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

Climax – the point of greatest dramatic tension or excitement in a story; **Examples:**

Othello's murder of Desdemona; in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the person chasing Scout is killed.

Foreshadowing – the use of hints or clues in a story to suggest what action is to come;

foreshadowing is frequently used to create interest and build suspense. **Example:** Two small and seemingly inconsequential car accidents predict and hint at the upcoming, important wreck in *The Great Gatsby*.

Mood – the emotional aspect of the work that contributes to the feeling the reader

gets from the book; **Example:** Gothic novels like *Frankenstein* have a gloomy, dark quality to them, which the author reflects through the depiction of nature, character, and plot.

Motif – a situation, incident, idea, or image that is repeated significantly in a literary

work; **Examples:** In *Hamlet*, revenge is a frequently repeated idea. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden continually comments on the phoniness of people he meets.

Naturalism – a literary movement that began in the late nineteenth century and

emphasized that man was as much a prisoner of instinct, environment, and heredity as animals were; man has no free will in the theory of naturalism.

Examples: *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*; *The Call of the Wild*

Personification – a figure of speech in which an object, abstract idea, or animal is

given human characteristics; **Examples:** The wall did its best to keep out the invaders.

“Because I could not stop for Death,

He kindly stopped for me.”

–Emily Dickinson

Point of View – the position or vantage point, determined by the author, from which

the story seems to come to the reader; the two most common points of view are first-person and third-person. **Examples:** First-person point of view occurs in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*; the reader receives all information through Huck's eyes. An example of third-person point of view is Dickens' *Hard Times*, in which the narrator is not a character in the book.

The Scarlet Letter

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Identify the sins of Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth, and trace the consequences of those sins on the person's life and character.
2. It is hard to believe today that a community would treat one of its members the way in which Hester was treated. What features of Boston society in 1642, however, make the actions of the Puritans quite understandable?
3. How do the psychological and moral aspects of this book provide relevance for today's readers, in spite of the vastly different customs portrayed?
4. Identify and explain at least three ways in which Hawthorne is part of the Romantic tradition and at least two ways in which he repudiates that tradition.
5. For what reasons would Hawthorne call his story a romance rather than a novel?
6. Name three characteristics of Hawthorne's style and cite examples of each.
7. Identify and explain the symbolism of each of the following items:
 - light and shadow
 - the scaffold
 - the rosebush and the weeds
 - the letter A
 - colors
 - the forest
 - the town
8. Explain Hawthorne's view on passion as related to human nature.
9. According to Hawthorne, what are the moral consequences of sin, and how does one become redeemed? Cite incidents from the story.
10. Using examples from the text, show that Hester is one of literature's first feminists.
11. Explain how the second scene on the scaffold serves as the novel's climax.
12. Consider the characters Pearl, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth. How are their names symbolic?

Chapter 1

VOCABULARY

allot – to divide or distribute in shares
congenial – pleasant, friendly
edifice – a building
inauspicious – not prosperous or promising
ponderous – weighty
sepulchers – burial vaults
utopia – a place or state of political or social perfection

1. What is the setting of *The Scarlet Letter*?

2. Nathaniel Hawthorne describes a prison, a cemetery, ugly weeds, and a wild rosebush. Explain the symbolism of each of these items.

3. What is the mood of *The Scarlet Letter*?

2. Discuss how Dimmesdale's behavior on the scaffold reveals his psychological stress.

3. What other characters are walking around late at night and why?

4. How does Dimmesdale feel as he holds Pearl's hand? Why does he feel this way?

5. Why does Pearl pull away from Dimmesdale?

6. Describe the two seemingly supernatural occurrences. What effect do they have?

7. How do the townspeople explain the nighttime phenomenon?
