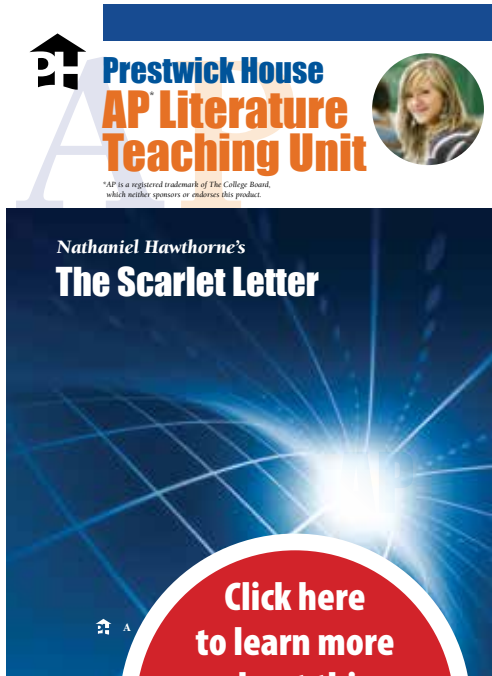




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Teaching Unit

# The Scarlet Letter

by Nathaniel Hawthorne

written by Douglas Grudzina



**Prestwick House**

Item No. 203081

# The Scarlet Letter

## Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. analyze the characters of Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale, Roger Chillingworth, Pearl, and their relationships to one another;
2. trace the development of Hester's, Chillingworth's, and Dimmesdale's characters from their first mention in the novel until their last, noting how and why they change;
3. examine characters and character relationships from a variety of literary positions;
4. investigate the various notions of sin;
5. identify the major elements of Romantic and Gothic literature;
6. discuss the structural development of the novel in terms of exposition, conflict, climax, resolution.
7. discuss Hawthorne's use of humor, pathos, and occasionally bathos;
8. analyze the importance of literary elements like dramatic irony and foreshadowing on the development of the plot;
9. discuss the frequent references to light and darkness and to plant life as symbols and elements of a metaphor.
10. analyze how Hawthorne creates suspense;
11. explain and identify examples of where the Transcendentalists and Anti-Transcendentalists parted company;
12. debate the rightness or wrongness of the three main characters, considering the multiple concepts of right and wrong as presented in the novel;
13. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition Exam;
14. respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition Exam;
15. offer a close reading of *The Scarlet Letter* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the novel.

## Background Lecture

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE 1804 – 1864

- Born in Salem, Massachusetts
- His ancestors were wealthy, influential people. One, William Hathorne, became a judge who persecuted Quakers; another, John Hathorne, sentenced many Salem women to death for witchcraft. Hawthorne was obsessed with the sins of these ancestors who reflected the religious intolerance of the Puritan society.
- The death of Hawthorne's father when Nathaniel was four resulted in a series of unfortunate circumstances that created a lonely childhood for the boy.
- Hawthorne graduated from Bowden College, Maine, and spent the next twelve years in seclusion as he struggled to become a writer.
- In 1837 he published *Twice Told Tales* and earned great national fame. His stories won the admiration of Edgar Allan Poe, who considered Hawthorne a genius.
- Another contemporary of Hawthorne, Herman Melville, who wrote *Moby-Dick*, became Hawthorne's close friend. They both reacted to the Transcendental philosophers of the nineteenth century. Many critics refer to this reaction as "Anti-Transcendentalism."
- During his life, Hawthorne was friendly with Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau; however, Hawthorne struggled with what he considered the overly optimistic ideas of the Transcendentalists. Evidence of this struggle between a belief in the perfectability of humanity by following one's individual conscience and the essentially evil nature of humankind is seen in the ambiguity of *The Scarlet Letter*.

### NOTES ON HAWTHORNE'S STYLE, SETTING, AND THEMES

1. In spite of Hawthorne's opposition to Transcendentalism, he is typical of the nineteenth century romantics. Like them, his stories
  - deal with the strange and the mysterious.
  - involve symbolic imagination.
  - turn to the past for subject matter.

### Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Identify the sin of Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth, and trace the consequences of that sin 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 the Boston society in 1642, however, make the actions of the Puritans quite understandable?
3. Despite the difference in clothing and customs, how do the psychological and moral aspects of this story make it very relevant for today's readers?
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 for 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 human nature regarding passion.
9. According to Hawthorne, what are the moral consequences of sin and how does one become redeemed? Cite incidents from the story.
10. Show that Hester is one of literature's first feminists using examples from the text.
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?
13. Hawthorne uses historical characters—Governor Bellingham, John Wilson, and Mistress Hibbins—and true depictions of Puritan society and beliefs to add authenticity to his work. Explain the effects that these elements make.

# The Scarlet Letter

## The Custom-House

1. What is the primary purpose for the Custom House introduction?

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2. What significant change does Hawthorne admit to making in telling the story contained in the diary?

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3. What potential impact will this change have on the story?

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**Chapter 3**

- 1. What purpose does the conversation between the townsman and the stranger at the beginning of this chapter serve?

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- 2. Why wasn't Hester sentenced to death for her adultery?

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- 3. Where has the stranger been? What motion does he make to Hester?

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- 4. Who is Dimmesdale? What appeal does he use to convince Hester to reveal the baby's father?

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5. How does Hester's character evolve?

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6. Describe the difference between Hester's clothing and her child's.

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7. What point is Hawthorne making about an individual's ability to separate oneself from one's wrongdoings?

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8. Where do Hawthorne's sympathies lie? How do you know?

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## Chapter 9

1. Why doesn't Chillingworth assert his rights as Hester's husband?

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2. A difference of opinion arises over the cause of Dimmesdale's failing health. Compare the townspeople's opinion to Dimmesdale's.

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3. Why does Dimmesdale reject Chillingworth's offer of help? What finally persuades him to accept the offer?

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4. Explain the ambiguity of the chapter's title, "The Leech."

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5. The passage sets up an interesting contrast between two types of men. What is this contrast, and how is it likely to shape the future of the novel?

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## Chapter 15

1. What is Hester coming to realize is the true sin she has committed? Why would Hawthorne consider this a worse sin than her sin with Dimmesdale?

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2. What does Hester realize about her “repentance”?

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3. Why does Hester hate Chillingworth?

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4. Hester refuses to answer Pearl’s question about the meaning of the “A.” Why does Hester not confide in Pearl?

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5. Why does Hawthorne portray Pearl as such a wild child?

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6. How have Hester’s conversations with Chillingworth and Pearl changed her attitude toward herself and her sin?

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