Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Scarlet Letter

by Nathaniel Hawthorne

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Item No. 200760
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.

The Scarlet Letter

Objectives

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

1. discuss the Puritan setting of this novel and at least three features of the Puritan community.

2. explain how this story has relevance for modern readers. In your explanation, discuss these two points:
   • *The Scarlet Letter* is a psychological story about sin and the consequences of sin.
   • *The Scarlet Letter* is a morality story about sin and redemption.

3. identify and discuss at least three characteristics of Hawthorne's writing that are part of the Romantic tradition.

4. recognize the following literary elements:
   • protagonist
   • antagonist
   • rising action
   • climax

5. identify at least three symbols in the novel and explain how each one is developed.

6. discuss the style of narration in *The Scarlet Letter*.

7. explain and discuss the following themes and motifs:
   • the town's representation of social restriction versus the forest's representation of freedom and advancement
   • the psychological effects that sin has on the four major characters in this novel
   • the moral consequences of sin and how one may achieve redemption
   • the dual aspects of Hester's punishment:
     • the psychological stigmatism of the scarlet letter
     • Pearl's role as a living symbol
   • the conflict of good versus evil
   • Hester Prynne as one of literature's first feminists
   • Chillingworth as a personification of evil

8. discuss the significance of the title.

9. explain aspects of dramatic irony found in the novel.

10. describe the prevalent mood of the novel and how it changes.

11. expound authentic elements of the novel, such as historical figures, events, and setting.
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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?

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

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3. What is the mood of The Scarlet Letter?

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3. Explain the incident with the breastplate.
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Chapter 8

VOCABULARY

*adduced* – brought forward as evidence
*albeit* – although or even if
*behest* – an earnest request
*indefeasible* – not to be annulled or made void
*mountebank* – a charlatan, a quack
*vehemence* – forcefulness

1. Consider the descriptions of the governor’s house. What is Hawthorne suggesting about the governor?
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2. How do the magistrates react to Pearl and why?
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3. How does Hester behave toward the magistrates and why?
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Chapter 15

VOCABULARY

**acrid** – bitter  
**asperity** – harshness  
**enigma** – something hard to understand or explain; a mystery  
**petulant** – insolent or rude  
**precocity** – the quality of exhibiting maturity at an unusually early age  
**propensity** – intense inclination  
**sedulous** – diligent; careful and busy  
**sere** – withered  
**upbraided** – criticized, scolded  
**verdure** – a condition of health and vigor

1. How does Hester feel about Chillingworth?

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2. The narrator asks, “Had seven long years, under the torture of the scarlet letter, inflicted so much of misery, and wrought out no repentance?” Has Hester repented her sin?

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3. How does Pearl imitate her mother? How does she explain her mother’s scarlet letter?

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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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3. What does Dimmesdale wonder when he pauses in the street?
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4. Has Dimmesdale committed a deadly sin by planning to escape with Hester?
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**Chapter 21**

**VOCABULARY**

- **animadversion** – adverse and typically ill-natured or unfair criticism
- **buckler** – a shield worn on the left arm
- **effervesce** – to bubble, to show liveliness
- **lees** – dregs
- **probity** – moral uprightness
- **quaff** – to drink deeply
- **wormwood** – something bitter and grievous; bitterness

1. In this chapter, Hawthorne frequently mentions the colors gray, black (sable), and brown. What does the emphasis on those colors suggest?
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2. What bad news does Hester receive from the ship captain?
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