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The Scarlet Letter
Nathaniel Hawthorne



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The Scarlet Letter

To The Student

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection—that is, stopping to think about what you are reading—that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.

Pre-Reading

1. Nathaniel Hawthorne spent some time living in the Brook Farm utopian community. These communities were popular during the first half of the eighteenth century, and such Transcendentalist thinkers as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman thought that such communities (in which people would blend together and work the land to support an idyllic society) would provide an alternative to mainstream society.

However, it did not turn out that way. Most of the communities folded relatively quickly. Hawthorne put down a \$1,000 deposit to move to Brook Farm and found himself assigned to maintain the “Gold Mine”—an ironically named pile of manure. He did not find his communal experience to be utopian at all, and so became one of the leaders, with Herman Melville, of the Anti-Transcendentalist school of thought.

Put yourself in Hawthorne’s place and write a diary entry that he might have written after his first week at Brook Farm.

2. There are many shades and synonyms for the color “red.” “Scarlet” is only one of these. It’s frequently used to refer either to disease, as in scarlet fever, or to the idea of humiliation—one often reads of characters blushing scarlet, for example. In *The Scarlet Letter*, of course, the emblem that Hester Prynne must wear is a sign of her public shaming.

Make a list of various shades of the color red. Then, make a list of synonyms for red, and of items that are commonly associated with the color red, such as a fire engine. Next to each item in your lists, write the first emotional association that you make with each shade or synonym.

Select several of your shades and synonyms that have an emotional association in common. Then, write a poem of at least ten lines that uses the words that you chose.

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5. A blurb is the paragraph that describes the book that one is about to read. The blurb for *The Scarlet Letter* talks about the tragic downfall of Arthur Dimmesdale and the sadistic cruelty of Roger Chillingworth. Hester Prynne's trials as the woman in the middle of these two men also appear.

The purpose of a blurb is to grab the reader's interest, but not spoil the story by giving away too many of the plot's events. Imagine that someone wrote your biography, and write the blurb that would appear on the dust jacket. What novel or play would your life resemble?

Another common feature of a dust jacket is selections from positive reviews of the books. Write a positive, three-line review of the story of your life.

6. Society's need to shame its sinners in the public realm is the source of much of the conflict in *The Scarlet Letter*. In many instances, the ways in which the various characters respond to this need and the potential effects this has on their lives drives the plot. While such figures as the witch, John Wilson, and Roger Chillingworth symbolize this need, it is the need itself that is corrosive to humanity. In a way, the invisibility and inevitability of this abstract antagonist makes this story timeless.

In your own life, what invisible enemies do you face? What are the pressures that you face from day to day? Examples might be time constraints, peer pressure, body weight, procrastination, and family strife among others.

If you could face your invisible enemy, what would you say to it? Write a conversation that the two of you might have.

Chapter 5: Hester at her Needle

17. As time goes by, Hester becomes more renowned for her sewing ability than reviled for her adulterous affair. She supports herself and her daughter Pearl quite nicely through her needlework.

In those days, information about a business like Hester's would have spread through a small community by word of mouth: the clients that Hester had pleased would pass her name along to others in need of a seamstress, and so her business would grow. However, in the larger towns, the infant industry of marketing was beginning to spread, with handbills appearing to advertise services.

Create the handbill that Hester might use for prospective clients. Be sure to include reasons why customers would want to use Hester as a seamstress, as well as prices and contact information.

18. While Hester becomes quite successful as a seamstress, there is one line of sewing in which she receives no commissions: that of "embroider[ing] the white veil" of a bride's wedding dress. Apparently, the community thought that having Hester work on a wedding veil might put a curse on the bride, or thought that the institution of marriage was something that Hester should not be able to associate with.

In our own time, this prohibition may seem confusing at best, hypocritical at worst. Women get married in white dresses on a regular basis without any thought being given to their past behavior.

Write a letter to a friend explaining the views of the Puritan era on the symbolism and value of a wedding dress, and relate those views to the Puritan idea for the marriage relationship, based on what you have read in *The Scarlet Letter*.

Chapter 7: The Governor's Hall

21. Hester has come to visit Governor Bellingham for several reasons; however, perhaps the most important reason is that the governor is deciding whether or not to remove Pearl from Hester's care and place her with a family who would provide her with a more suitable moral upbringing.

In our own time, children are removed from their parents' custody for such issues as physical or sexual abuse or parental neglect. Divorce and adultery have become so commonplace that, if they served as a cause to remove children from their parents' care, the majority of children in the United States would not be permitted to live with their parents. It is important to remember the stringent moral climate that the Puritans were seeking to establish in the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Write a letter to Governor Bellingham about Hester's case. Your letter should be at least 3/4 of a page and should state your opinion as to whether Pearl should stay with her mother or move in with a complete family unit. Use reasons from the text and your own personal experience to support your answer.

22. The novel seeks, in this chapter, to compare the scarlet letter that Hester wears and the daughter that Hester raises. Indeed, in the community, every time Pearl comes into view, bouncing along in her bright red dresses, the townspeople are reminded of the woman who stood on the scaffold in the market-place and the baby that she clutched to her side while refusing to name the father.

On your paper, draw lines to make two columns. In the left column, list ways in which the scarlet letter and Pearl are similar. In the right column, write ways in which the scarlet letter and Pearl are different. You should try to put at least five items in each column.