

VIEW

EDIT

The Scarlet Letter

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The Scarlet Letter (1850)

By: Nathaniel Hawthorne



PENGUIN  CLASSICS

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

The Scarlet Letter

OVERVIEW

Published in March of 1850, [Nathaniel Hawthorne](#) composed one of his best-selling books, [The Scarlet Letter](#). Instantly gaining popularity among the New England society, the book tells a story of an adulterous affair of two lovers with their constant struggle of living a new life full of pride and remorse. The major themes that Hawthorne utilizes throughout the book consisted of [sin](#), [guilt](#), and [Puritan values](#). Even though the concept of adultery was a risky issue to write about, he received much support from the New England literary establishment, allowing *The Scarlet Letter* to start the beginnings of the [Transcendentalist Movement](#) (7).

PLOT SUMMARY

The Scarlet Letter begins with a preface of the novel's beginning in [Salem, Massachusetts](#) with an unknown [surveyor](#) of the customhouse. This surveyor (who is Hawthorne) accidentally discovers a scarlet cloth with gold [embroidery](#) in the shape of an "A" among a pile of manuscripts. The manuscripts contain information aging back two hundred years from the time of the narrator. Once fired, he used this information to create the fictional story of *The Scarlet Letter* (7). Proceeding to the novel, the story unfolds with [Hester Prynne](#), a young woman punished for adultery, is taken to the [town scaffold](#) with her infant daughter to reveal the identity of the father. She bears the scarlet letter "A" on her breast, signifying her sin to the community, ultimately causing shame and isolation to her and her daughter, [Pearl](#). Throughout the story, [Roger Chillingworth](#), Hester's returned husband from years of missing astray, is under a different alias as a doctor discovers the identity of his wife's lover as [Arthur Dimmesdale](#), the town's reverend. He tortures both Dimmesdale and Hester of the secret, resulting with the former lovers to escape to Europe with Pearl as a family. While Chillingworth knows of the plan, Dimmesdale delivers his sermon to the town from the scaffold, where he suddenly feels convicted to publicly state his sins, then falling off the scaffold to his death. Unable to get his revenge, Chillingworth dies a year later, leaving Pearl to inherit his fortune and venture off to Europe. Hester continues to live her life helping the poor till she passes away (3).

MAIN CHARACTERS

The novel consists of four main characters: [Hester Prynne](#), [Roger Chillingworth](#), [Arthur Dimmesdale](#), and [Pearl](#).

- Hester Prynne, the main character, is a thoughtful, stoic woman from the result of the community isolating and shaming due to her affair. In addition, she is a compassionate, independent, maternal figure to her daughter, Pearl, and society by providing care, food, and clothing for the poor (2).
- Roger Chillingworth, just as his name speaks, is Hester's bitter husband who provokes torment on Dimmesdale and his wife of their situation, causing him to become a sick and

corrupted man (1).

- Arthur Dimmesdale, the well respected but shy Boston reverend, is a man of a guilty conscience for not disclosing his sin with Hester. He causes self-inflicted pain on himself, believing that his selfishness and betrayal is far greater sin than his secret affair (1).
- Lastly, Pearl, the illegitimate daughter of Hester and Arthur, is a young, rebellious outcast that is described as "the scarlet letter endowed with life," a constant reminder of Hester's private sin. However, she is portrayed as a product of love by her mother and is freed from the oppression of the community as an adult living in Europe (1).

KEY STYLISTIC TECHNIQUES

Nathaniel Hawthorne utilized a wide variety of stylistic techniques within *The Scarlet Letter* such as symbols, motifs, and themes. Hawthorne used several symbols within the novel, the scarlet "A" letter, mainly representing as the focal point of the story. The scarlet letter is supposed to symbolize shame upon Hester, when in reality, the letter becomes her identity. Pearl is another symbol representing her mother in a younger version and is also a constant reminder of Hester's sin. Pearl is the reasoning behind her mother's purpose to continue on in life, however, until Dimmesdale confessed as her father, the symbolic meaning behind Pearl is not important anymore. The motifs expressed in the novel is wilderness vs the civilization, which is describing how Hester and Pearl are isolated from the society of the community. In addition, another motif is comparing night vs day. In the daylight, the characters are conformed to society, living a "normal" life, but in the night, the true personalities of the characters come alive. The added value of motifs, symbols and themes make *The Scarlet Letter* the popular literary sensation it truly is (9).

FORM AND STRUCTURE

The novel is very well written, having three crucial scaffold scenes including three of the four main characters, Hester, Arthur, and Pearl. The first scaffold scene concerns with Hester Prynne at the beginning of the story. She is forced to stay upon the scaffold for three hours in front of the community in shame, urged to reveal the name of her secretive lover. Arthur Dimmesdale, who the writer tells as the father later in the book, openly tells Hester to tell the truth so no one presumes he is as a viable suspect. The second occurrence of the scaffold solely involves Arthur during the middle of the night seven years later. Feelings of conviction have been lurking over him, however, he is not able to publicly confess his private sins. To punish himself, Arthur brands himself with a scarlet "A" on his chest for his selfishness and betrayal to Hester. The final scene of the scaffold is Arthur openly confessing his past, leaving him an open conscience, yet he dies at the platform. Pearl is the one who broke the spell with a kiss on her father's lips. Dimmesdale was able to defeat his guilt and Roger Chillingworth, saying "With God's help, I shall escape thee now" as he dies. Throughout the three scenes of the scaffolds, Arthur is transformed from a powerful, guilty man to a victorious man, free of his horrible guilt (8).

THEMATIC CONCERNS

While *The Scarlet Letter* has many different themes intertwined into one novel, however, the main theme consisted of sin. In Puritan society, they believed that everyone was born a sinner and had constantly remain pure as possibly, not committing crimes such as adultery. If these sins were committed, they were considered punishable by death into Hell. However, Hester's life was spare to be a "living sermon against sin," bearing the scarlet "A" on her chest, representing shame. Instead, she transformed the "A" with gold embroidery, creating a symbol of strength rather than remorse and guilt, raising a whole new meaning to what actually sin is. Hester was willing to rekindle her relationship with Dimmesdale, revealing that she didn't view adultery as a sin compared to what society thought. Another strong aspect of Hawthorne's novel is the harsh, strict view of Puritanism. Throughout the story, Hawthorne combined the law with the religion of Puritanism, which created a "whole dismal severity of the Puritanical code of law." Hester was viewed as a free-spirited, independent young women with a high self-esteem within the book, traits that are highly degradable to the Puritan society at the time. Hawthorne presented the Puritans as whole as hypocritical, a very contrasting view when he presented Hester and Pearl as assets to society by Hester as a seamstress and Pearl inheriting Chillingworth's fortune (6).

SELECTED QUOTES FROM *THE SCARLET LETTER*

"Reminiscences, the trifling and immaterial, passages of infancy and school days, sports, childish quarrels, and traits of her maiden years, came swarming back upon her, intermingled with recollections of whatever was graves in her subsequent life; one picture precisely as vivid as another as if all were of similar importance, or all alike a play. Possibly it was an instinctive device of her spirit to relieve itself, by the exhibition of these phantasmagoric forms, from the cruel weight and hardness of the reality." (The Scarlet Letter, Penguin Classics, Pg. 65) (4).

"As the last touch to her mermaid's garb, Pearl took some eel-grass, and imitated, as best she could on her own bosom, the decoration with which she was so familiar on her mother's. A letter,--the letter A,--but freshly green, instead of scarlet!" (The Scarlet Letter, Penguin Classics, Pg. 155) (4).

"There glimmered the embroidered letter, with comfort in its unearthly ray. Elsewhere the token of sin, it was the taper of the sick-chamber. It had even thrown its gleam, in the sufferer's hard extremity, across the verge of time. It had shown him where to set his foot while the light of earth was fast becoming dim, and ere the light of futurity could reach him. In such emergencies, Hester's nature showed itself warm and rich; a wellspring of human tenderness, unfailling to every real demand, and inexhaustible by the largest. Her breast, with its badge of shame, was, but the softer pillow for the head of that needed one. She was self-ordained a Sister of Mercy; or, we may rather say, the world's heavy hand had so ordained her when neither the world nor she looked forward to this result. The letter was the symbol of her calling.....They said that it meant 'Able'; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength." (The Scarlet Letter, Penguin Classics, Pg. 156) (4).

"But the former aspect of an intellectual and studious man, calm and quiet, which was what she best remembered in him, had altogether vanished and been succeeded by an eager, searching, almost fierce, yet carefully guarded look. It seemed to be his wish and purpose to mask this expression with a smile; but the latter played him false, and flickered over his visage so derisively, that the spectator could see his blackness all the better for it. Ever and anon, too, there came a glare of red light out of

his eyes; as if the old man's soul were on fire, and kept on smoldering duskiy within his breast, until, by some casual puff 's passion, it was blown into a momentary flame. This he repressed, as speedily as possible, and strove to look as if nothing of the kind had happened. In a word, old Rog Chillingworth was a striking evidence of man's faculty of transforming himself into a devil, if he w only, for a reasonable space of time, undertake a devil's office." (The Scarlet Letter, Penguin Classi Pg. 163) (4).

"Such was the sympathy of Nature that wild, heathen Nature of the forest, never subjugated by human law, nor illumined by higher truth with the bliss of these two spirits! Love, whether newly born or aroused from a deathlike slumber, must always create the sunshine, filling the heart so full of radiance that it overflows upon the outward world. Had the forest still kept its gloom, it would have been bright in Hester's eyes, and bright in Arthur Dimmesdale's!" (The Scarlet Letter, Penguin Classics, Pg. 193) (4).

"Without disputing a truth so momentous, we must be allowed to consider this version of Mr. Dimmesdale's story as only an instance of that stubborn fidelity with which a man's friends and especially a clergyman's will sometimes uphold his character, when proofs, clear as the midday sunshine on the scarlet letter, establish him a false and sin-stained creature of the dust." (The Scar Letter, Penguin Classics, Pg. 241) (4).

FEEDBACK FROM CRITICS

The Scarlet Letter's instant success after publication was due to how Hawthorne addressed the spiritual and moral issues in a very uniquely way compared to the American standard at the time. Due to its psychological and philosophical depth, this literary work is seen as Hawthorne greatest work. [Henry James](#), an author, once stated that Hawthorne's novel was "beautiful, admirable, extraordinary, it has the highest degree that merit which I have spoken as the mark of Hawthorne's best things an indefinable purity and lightness..... (3)." In addition, another author that appreciate Hawthorne's work was [Edwin Percy Whipple](#), who wrote *Graham's Magazine*, enjoying the "beauti and touching romance" and the opening satirical preface of "The Custom-House (5)."

FURTHER READING

[Puritanism](#)

[The Carnavalesque in Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter](#)

[Antebellum Feminists on Hawthorne: Reconsidering the Reception of The Scarlet Lett](#)

[An Analysis of Hester's Hypocrisy in The Scarlet Letter](#)

[A Representative of the New Female Image-Analyzing Hester Prynne's Feminist Consciousness in The Scarlet Letter](#)


[Intertextuality and History: America's Colonial Past in The Scarlet Letter](#)

[Hawthorne in the Custom-House: The Metapolitics, Post politics, and Politics of "The Scarlet Letter."](#)

[`Apples of the Thoughts and Fancies': Nature as a narrator in the Scarlet Letter.](#)

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