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The Scarlet Letter

Nathaniel Hawthorne · *1850 · original English text*

In Puritan Boston, Hester Prynne wears the letter of her adultery in public, while the minister who shares her sin hides his, and the wronged husband turns himself into an instrument of revenge. The romance is a severe inquiry into truth, concealment, repentance and mercy — and into what a community does with a sinner's shame.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

Can a hidden sin be healed by anything but truth?

"Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!"
The narrator · Chapter XXIV

Hawthorne's answer is costly: Hester's public shame becomes, over years, a kind of service; Dimmesdale's secrecy eats him until he confesses on the scaffold and dies; Chillingworth, living for revenge, withers when his victim is gone. There is no cheap forgiveness, and no health in the lie.

KEY CHARACTERS

Hester Prynne
open shame, endurance, service

Arthur Dimmesdale
hidden guilt; late confession

Roger Chillingworth
wronged husband turned revenger

Pearl
the child; truth that will not be evaded

Governor Bellingham
public authority

Rev. John Wilson
the older clergy

Mistress Hibbins
the rumour of the black man

THE CLOSING LESSON

> *"in the view of Infinite Purity, we are sinners all alike."*
> **The narrator, on one reading of the minister's death** · Chapter XXIV

> *"ON A FIELD, SABLE, THE LETTER A, GULES."*
> **The tombstone** · Chapter XXIV

Grades 10–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01 The Scaffold

CHAPTERS I–IV

One sinner is shown; two others watch.

- From the prison, **Hester Prynne** is led to the market-place scaffold with her infant, **Pearl**
- She wears the scarlet A and will not name the child's father
- In the crowd is a stranger, her long-absent husband, who takes the name **Roger Chillingworth**
- In the prison he makes her swear not to reveal him, and he will seek the other guilty one

02 Hester and Pearl

CHAPTERS V–VIII

A life of open shame, and a child who will not be a cipher.

- Hester lives in a cottage, earns her bread by her needle, and slowly becomes useful to the poor
- Pearl is wild, bright, and bound to the letter — a living reminder
- The authorities consider taking the child; Hester defends her right to keep her
- **Arthur Dimmesdale**, the beloved young minister, speaks for her, with a strange intensity

03 The Leech

CHAPTERS IX–XII

Revenge takes a chair at the minister's side.

- Chillingworth, posing as a physician, becomes Dimmesdale's intimate and studies him
- The minister's hidden guilt wastes his body and poisons his preaching with self-loathing
- Chillingworth finds, in a moment of sleep, the mark of the letter on Dimmesdale's breast
- At night Dimmesdale stands on the scaffold; Hester and Pearl join him in the dark; he will not stand there by day

> *"At the great judgment day," whispered the minister,—and, strangely enough, the sense that he was a professional teacher of the truth impelled him to answer the child so. "Then, and there, before the judgment-seat, thy mother, and thou, and I must stand together. But the daylight of this world shall not see our meeting!"*
> **Dimmesdale to Pearl** · Chapter XII

04 The Forest

CHAPTERS XIII–XIX

A plan to flee, and a hope that is still a kind of concealment.

- Hester's A has come, in the town's mind, to mean "Able" as well as shame
- She meets Chillingworth and tells him she will be silent no longer
- In the forest she and Dimmesdale speak truly at last; she urges flight to Europe
- For a moment she casts off the letter; Pearl will not come until it is back on her mother's breast
- They agree to go after his Election Sermon

> *"What we did had a consecration of its own. We felt it so! We said so to each other!"*
> **Hester to Dimmesdale** · Chapter XVII

05 The Confession

CHAPTERS XX–XXIV

He will not take the ship. He will take the scaffold.

- The Election Sermon is his greatest; then he turns to the scaffold, not to the ship
- He calls Hester and Pearl, confesses his sin before the people, and shows the mark on his breast
- Pearl kisses him; "a spell was broken," and her errand of anguish is done
- Dimmesdale dies; Chillingworth, deprived of his object, withers and soon follows
- Hester goes away, then returns; she wears the letter by her own will, and becomes a counsellor of the sorrowful. The tombstone reads: "On a field, sable, the letter A, gules."

> *"Pearl kissed his lips. A spell was broken."*
> **The narrator** · Chapter XXIII

Sin & Shame | Truth vs. Concealment | Repentance | Revenge | Mercy | Public Judgment

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 10–12

1. Three people share a sin and take three paths: public confession (Hester), secrecy (Dimmesdale), revenge (Chillingworth). Follow what each path does to the soul.
2. Pearl will not be put off with vague blessings. She keeps asking who her father is, and in the light.
3. Hester's letter changes its meaning over years, but it is not made into a trinket. The book is more severe than that.
4. The forest meeting is not a wedding. Hester's "consecration" is her claim; Dimmesdale still has a confession to make in public.
5. Watch the scaffold as a repeating stage: opening shame, midnight almost-confession, final truth.
6. The book's last counsel is "Be true." How is that different from both the town's pillory and the lovers' plan of flight?

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #25344, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/the-scarlet-letter/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.