

the scarlet letter summary

the scarlet letter summary provides an in-depth overview of Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic novel, a cornerstone of American literature. This article explores the plot, characters, themes, and symbolism embedded within the story, presenting a comprehensive understanding of the book's narrative and its cultural significance. The scarlet letter is set in a Puritan society and details the consequences of sin, guilt, and redemption through the experiences of Hester Prynne and other key figures. By examining the novel's historical context and literary devices, this summary aims to offer a well-rounded perspective suitable for students, scholars, and literature enthusiasts alike. The following sections break down the primary elements of the novel, including a plot synopsis, character analysis, thematic exploration, and symbolic meanings. This structured approach facilitates a clear grasp of the scarlet letter summary and its enduring impact on American literary tradition.

- Plot Overview of The Scarlet Letter
- Main Characters and Their Roles
- Major Themes in The Scarlet Letter
- Symbolism and Literary Devices
- Historical and Cultural Context

Plot Overview of The Scarlet Letter

The scarlet letter summary begins with a detailed recounting of the novel's plot, which is set in 17th-century Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony. The story commences with Hester Prynne, who has been condemned to wear a scarlet letter "A" on her chest as punishment for adultery. She refuses to reveal the identity of her partner, causing a scandal within the strict moral community. As the narrative unfolds, the consequences of this act ripple through the lives of Hester, her secret lover Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, and her estranged husband Roger Chillingworth. The plot intricately explores themes of sin, guilt, and redemption while highlighting the harshness of Puritanical judgment.

Initial Punishment and Public Shaming

Hester's public humiliation is the novel's opening event. Forced to stand on the scaffold with her infant daughter Pearl, she endures the scorn and judgment of the townspeople while wearing the embroidered scarlet letter "A"

as a symbol of her adultery. This initial punishment sets the tone for the conflict between individual identity and societal expectations.

Secret Sin and Inner Turmoil

Reverend Dimmesdale, the secret father of Pearl, suffers intense psychological anguish due to his concealed sin. His internal conflict contrasts with Hester's outward punishment, showcasing the duality of public versus private guilt. Meanwhile, Roger Chillingworth, Hester's vengeful husband, seeks to uncover and torment Dimmesdale, adding complexity to the narrative.

Resolution and Consequences

The climax occurs when Dimmesdale publicly confesses his sin during a sermon, revealing his guilt to the community. This confession leads to his death, while Hester and Pearl's futures remain open to interpretation. The scarlet letter, once a mark of shame, evolves into a symbol of resilience and identity.

Main Characters and Their Roles

Understanding the scarlet letter summary requires a close examination of the characters who drive the narrative. Each character represents different facets of human nature and societal norms, contributing to the novel's exploration of morality.

Hester Prynne

Hester is the protagonist, a strong and complex woman who endures public shame with dignity. Her character challenges the rigid Puritan values by embodying compassion, independence, and strength. Throughout the novel, Hester transforms the meaning of the scarlet letter from a symbol of sin to one of personal identity and resilience.

Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale

Dimmesdale is the town minister and Pearl's father, whose concealed guilt causes profound psychological suffering. His character illustrates the damaging effects of hidden sin and hypocrisy within a repressive society. Dimmesdale's internal conflict and eventual confession are central to the novel's moral message.

Roger Chillingworth

Chillingworth, Hester's estranged husband, represents vengeance and evil obsession. His transformation into a figure of cruelty underscores the destructive power of revenge and bitterness. Chillingworth's pursuit of

Dimmesdale adds tension and darkness to the story.

Pearl

Pearl, Hester's daughter, symbolizes both the consequence of sin and the possibility of redemption. Her wild, untamed nature contrasts with the strict Puritan environment, serving as a living reminder of her mother's transgression but also as a source of hope and vitality.

Major Themes in The Scarlet Letter

The scarlet letter summary highlights several key themes that are essential to understanding the novel's message and enduring relevance.

Sin and Redemption

The novel explores sin not merely as a moral failing but as a complex human experience with consequences and the potential for forgiveness. Hester's punishment and Dimmesdale's hidden guilt illustrate different approaches to sin and its impact on the human soul.

Guilt and Punishment

While Hester's punishment is public and visible, Dimmesdale's guilt is internalized and psychologically tormenting. This juxtaposition emphasizes the varied ways individuals cope with wrongdoing and societal judgment.

Individual vs. Society

The conflict between personal identity and societal expectations is central to the narrative. Hester's defiance of Puritan norms and her refusal to be defined solely by her sin challenge the rigidity of the community's moral code.

Hypocrisy and Judgment

The novel critiques the hypocrisy of a society that harshly condemns outward transgressions while concealing its own sins. Dimmesdale's secret and the townspeople's judgmental attitudes exemplify this theme.

Isolation and Alienation

Characters such as Hester and Dimmesdale experience isolation—social and emotional—as a result of their actions and the community's response. This theme underscores the human need for connection and understanding despite moral failings.

Symbolism and Literary Devices

The scarlet letter summary also examines the rich symbolism and literary techniques employed by Nathaniel Hawthorne to deepen the narrative's meaning.

The Scarlet Letter "A"

The scarlet letter itself is the most prominent symbol, evolving in meaning throughout the novel. Initially representing "adultery," it later signifies "able" or "angel" as Hester redefines her identity in the community.

Pearl as a Symbol

Pearl symbolizes the living embodiment of Hester's sin and also serves as a symbol of innocence and natural human emotion, contrasting the artificial rigidity of Puritan society.

Light and Darkness

Hawthorne uses imagery of light and darkness to convey themes of knowledge, truth, and concealment. Dimmesdale's hidden sin exists in darkness, while moments of revelation are often associated with light.

The Scaffold

The scaffold serves as a recurring symbol of public judgment and confession. It is the site of Hester's punishment and Dimmesdale's eventual admission of guilt, representing the intersection of private sin and public morality.

Forest Setting

The forest contrasts with the strict, oppressive Puritan town, symbolizing freedom, natural law, and the complexity of human emotion beyond societal constraints.

Literary Devices

- **Allegory:** The scarlet letter functions as an allegory for sin and redemption.
- **Irony:** Dramatic irony is prevalent, especially concerning Dimmesdale's hidden sin.
- **Foreshadowing:** Hawthorne uses foreshadowing to hint at later revelations and conflicts.
- **Symbolism:** Numerous symbols enrich the text's layers of meaning.

Historical and Cultural Context

Understanding the scarlet letter summary also involves recognizing the historical and cultural backdrop against which Hawthorne wrote this novel. Published in 1850, the novel reflects 19th-century American concerns about morality, identity, and social order.

Puritan Society

The setting is a 17th-century Puritan settlement, characterized by strict religious adherence and harsh penalties for moral transgressions. This context is critical to understanding the severity of Hester's punishment and the community's response to sin.

Author's Background and Perspective

Nathaniel Hawthorne, descended from Puritan ancestors, was deeply interested in exploring themes of guilt, sin, and morality. His ambivalent view of Puritanism informs the novel's critical stance toward its rigid social codes.

Impact on American Literature

The scarlet letter is widely regarded as a foundational work in American literature, notable for its psychological depth and moral complexity. It paved the way for later explorations of individualism and social criticism in American fiction.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main plot of The Scarlet Letter?

The Scarlet Letter is a novel set in 17th-century Puritan Massachusetts, focusing on Hester Prynne, who is publicly shamed and forced to wear a scarlet 'A' after bearing an illegitimate child. The story explores themes of sin, guilt, and redemption as Hester faces societal ostracism while her secret lover, Reverend Dimmesdale, struggles with his hidden guilt.

Who are the central characters in The Scarlet Letter?

The central characters include Hester Prynne, the protagonist who bears the scarlet letter; Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, her secret lover and the father of her child; Roger Chillingworth, Hester's estranged husband who seeks revenge; and Pearl, Hester's outspoken and wild daughter.

What does the scarlet letter symbolize in the novel?

The scarlet letter 'A' initially symbolizes adultery and shame, marking Hester as a sinner. However, as the story progresses, it takes on more complex meanings such as strength, resilience, and the ability to overcome societal judgment.

How does Hester Prynne change throughout the novel?

Hester evolves from a shamed adulteress to a strong, independent woman who supports herself and her daughter despite social condemnation. She becomes a symbol of dignity and compassion, challenging the rigid moral codes of her Puritan community.

What are the major themes explored in The Scarlet Letter?

The Scarlet Letter explores themes of sin and redemption, the nature of guilt and punishment, the conflict between individual identity and societal expectations, hypocrisy within religious communities, and the complexity of human emotions and morality.

Additional Resources

1. *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne

This classic novel tells the story of Hester Prynne, a woman in 17th-century Puritan Massachusetts who conceives a daughter through an adulterous affair. Forced to wear the scarlet letter "A" as a symbol of shame, Hester struggles with public humiliation and isolation. The novel explores themes of sin, guilt, and redemption.

2. *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller

Set during the Salem witch trials, this play delves into the hysteria and moral panic that gripped a Puritan community. Like *The Scarlet Letter*, it examines themes of sin, punishment, and societal judgment. The story highlights the destructive power of fear and false accusations.

3. *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë

This novel follows the life of Jane Eyre, an orphaned governess who faces hardships and moral dilemmas. It explores themes of social criticism, morality, and individual integrity, similar to the complex character study found in *The Scarlet Letter*. Jane's resilience and quest for identity resonate with Hawthorne's themes.

4. *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott

While more optimistic in tone, this novel also explores the roles and challenges of women in a restrictive society. It touches on themes of morality, personal growth, and societal expectations that parallel some of the gender and social issues in *The Scarlet Letter*.

5. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe

This influential novel addresses issues of sin and redemption in the context of slavery in America. It shares with *The Scarlet Letter* a deep concern with morality and the consequences of societal injustice. The book played a significant role in shaping attitudes toward slavery and human rights.

6. *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë

A dark and passionate tale of love, revenge, and social class, this novel explores the complexities of human emotion and moral ambiguity. The intense psychological and emotional themes complement the tragic and moral struggles seen in *The Scarlet Letter*.

7. *Hester* by Margaret Oliphant

This lesser-known novel also features a strong female protagonist named Hester who confronts societal judgment and personal hardship. It echoes the themes of female strength and resilience present in Hawthorne's work, providing a Victorian perspective on similar struggles.

8. *Beloved* by Toni Morrison

This powerful novel explores the haunting legacy of slavery and the struggle for identity and redemption. Its themes of past trauma, guilt, and forgiveness resonate with the emotional depth and moral complexity found in *The Scarlet Letter*. Morrison's narrative style offers a modern take on historical suffering and resilience.

9. *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert

Flaubert's novel tells the story of Emma Bovary, a woman trapped in a provincial life who seeks escape through romantic fantasies and affairs. Like *The Scarlet Letter*, it examines themes of adultery, societal judgment, and the consequences of personal choices. The book is a critical look at the constraints placed on women in 19th-century society.

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the scarlet letter summary: The Scarlet Letter Nathaniel Hawthorne, 2000-09-19

Introduction by Kathryn Harrison Commentary by Nathaniel Hawthorne, W. D. Howells, and Carl Van Doren A stark tale of adultery, guilt, and social repression in Puritan New England, *The Scarlet Letter* is a foundational work of American literature. Nathaniel Hawthorne's exploration of the dichotomy between the public and private self, internal passion and external convention, gives us the unforgettable Hester Prynne, who discovers strength in the face of ostracism and emerges as a heroine ahead of her time. As Kathryn Harrison points out in her Introduction, Hester is "the herald of the modern heroine." Includes a Modern Library Reading Group Guide

the scarlet letter summary: The Scarlet Letter Nathaniel Hawthorne, 2013-04-03 A throng of bearded men, in sad-coloured garments and grey steeple-crowned hats, inter-mixed with women, some wearing hoods, and others bareheaded, was assembled in front of a wooden edifice, the door of which was heavily timbered with oak, and studded with iron spikes. The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognised it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison. In accordance with this rule it may safely be assumed that the forefathers of Boston had built the first prison-house somewhere in the Vicinity of Cornhill, almost as seasonably as they marked out the first burial-ground, on Isaac Johnson's lot, and round about his grave, which subsequently became the nucleus of all the congregated sepulchres in the old churchyard of King's Chapel. Certain it is that, some fifteen or twenty years after the settlement of the town, the wooden jail was already marked with weather-stains and other indications of age, which gave a yet darker aspect to its beetle-browed and gloomy front. The rust on the ponderous iron-work of its oaken door looked more antique than anything else in the New World. Like all that pertains to crime, it seemed never to have known a youthful era. Before this ugly edifice, and between it and the wheel-track of the street, was a grass-plot, much overgrown with burdock, pig-weed, apple-pern, and such unsightly vegetation, which evidently found something congenial in the soil that had so early borne the black flower of civilised society, a prison. But on one side of the portal, and rooted almost at the threshold, was a wild rose-bush, covered, in this month of June, with its delicate gems, which might be imagined to offer their fragrance and fragile beauty to the prisoner as he went in, and to the condemned criminal as he came forth to his doom, in token that the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to him.

the scarlet letter summary: The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne (Book Analysis) Bright Summaries, 2019-03-28 Unlock the more straightforward side of The Scarlet Letter with this concise and insightful summary and analysis! This engaging summary presents an analysis of The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne. The "scarlet letter" of the title is the letter "A", which the protagonist Hester Prynne must wear as punishment for having committed adultery. However, Hester's virtuous behaviour throughout the narrative makes clear, the line between guilt and innocence is not clear-cut, and she proves an easy character to sympathise with. Through her story, Hawthorne examines the stifling role of Puritanism in her society and the double standards applied to men and women in matters of morality. The Scarlet Letter was chosen by The Guardian as one of the 100 greatest novels ever written in English, and it is widely considered to be a classic of American literature. Find out everything you need to know about The Scarlet Letter in a fraction of the time! This in-depth and informative reading guide brings you: • A complete plot summary • Character studies • Key themes and symbols • Questions for further reflection Why choose BrightSummaries.com? Available in print and digital format, our publications are designed to accompany you on your reading journey. The clear and concise style makes for easy understanding, providing the perfect opportunity to improve your literary knowledge in no time. See the very best of literature in a whole new light with BrightSummaries.com!

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short while was forced to accept a position in the custom-house again, this time as surveyor in his native town of Salem. It was during this period he wrote *The Scarlet Letter*, published in 1850, which immediately brought him fame, and still remains the most popular of his novels. Hawthorne himself has described how the story came to be written. The discovery of an old manuscript by a former surveyor, and a rag of scarlet cloth, which, on careful examination, assumed the shape of a letter--the capital A--gave a reasonably complete explanation of the whole affair of one Hester Prynne, who appeared to have been rather a noteworthy personage in the view of our ancestors. Nathaniel Hawthorne died on May 18, 1864. For more eBooks visit www.kartindo.com

the scarlet letter summary: The Scarlet Letter Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1906 In the puritan atmosphere of colonial New England, Hester Prynne is forced to wear a scarlet A (for adultery) for giving birth to an illegitimate daughter. The child's father, the minister Arthur Dimmesdale, knows peace only after he has been shamed into confessing. Hester, however, acknowledging no sin, cannot find such peace. Here is a masterful account of religious and sexual oppression, hypocrisy, and intrigue by one of the giants of American fiction.

the scarlet letter summary: The Scarlet Letter Annotated Nathaniel Hawthorne, 2020-08-13 This annotated student edition features: ● Full original text, plus annotations and summaries written by a certified high school English teacher ● Annotations of literary devices, biblical allusions and historical accounts to help you understand while you read the original text ● Identifications of people and places not easily understood by the reader allowing you to instantly understand the context of Hawthorne's writing ● Study Guide/Summary for each chapter to check for understanding, or get you through that important quiz you forgot about ● Key vocabulary words in bold print you can use the kindle dictionary to quickly define for understanding or to complete an assignment Oh No! You've been assigned a book to read that is over 150 years old! What was Nathaniel Hawthorne even talking about? People don't talk like this anymore! Use this annotated student edition to decipher exactly what Nathaniel Hawthorne meant, and impress your English teacher with your spot-on interpretations. Have time to read the entire book? Use the annotations to understand the deeper meaning of the original text. In a hurry? Read the chapter summaries to get you through those pesky reading quizzes. Need help with the archaic vocabulary? Use the bold text and Kindle dictionary to quickly find the definitions and get back to doing what you truly love--nothing. No matter what type of student you are, this edition will get you through your assigned reading of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Your teacher asks you for an example of a biblical allusion, just look for some italicized text, and Voila! Your assignment is done. Sample annotations and identifications in the original text: Biblical Allusion: These old gentlemen--seated, like Matthew (the apostle in the Bible, writer of a gospel; was once a tax official prior to his calling to Jesus' ministry) at the receipt of custom, but not very liable to be summoned thence, like him, for apostolic errands--were Custom-House officers. Identification: To detect, as one or another addressed me, the tremor of a voice which, in long-past days, had been wont to bellow through a speaking-trumpet, hoarsely enough to frighten Boreas (Greek god of the north wind) himself to silence. Events adapted from Hawthorne's life: Such were some of the people with whom I now found myself connected. I took it in good part, at the hands of Providence (divine guidance), that I was thrown into a position so little akin to my past habits; and set myself seriously to gather from it whatever profit was to be had. After my fellowship of toil and impracticable schemes with the dreamy brethren of Brook Farm (communal farm in West Roxbury, MA based on transcendentalism. Like the narrator, Hawthorne was an investor, but later left); after living for three years within the subtle influence of an intellect like Emerson's (Ralph Waldo Emerson: transcendentalist poet); after those wild, free days on the Assabeth (river West of Boston, MA), indulging fantastic speculations, beside our fire of fallen boughs, with Ellery Channing (transcendentalist poet).

the scarlet letter summary: The Scarlet Letter Nathaniel Hawthorne, 2019-12-17 *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne is a real classic. You should grab it and read it to experience it yourself. Here's a simple plot to *The Scarlet Letter*: In Puritan Boston, Massachusetts, a crowd gathers to witness the punishment of Hester Prynne, a young woman who has given birth to a baby

of unknown parentage. She is required to wear a scarlet A on her dress when she is in front of the townspeople to shame her. The letter A stands for adulteress, although this is never said explicitly in the novel. Her sentence required her to stand on the scaffold for three hours, exposed to public humiliation, and to wear the scarlet A for the rest of her life. As Hester approaches the scaffold, many of the women in the crowd are angered by her beauty and quiet dignity. When demanded and cajoled to name the father of her child, Hester refuses. As Hester looks out over the crowd, she notices a small, misshapen man and recognizes him as her long-lost husband, who has been presumed lost at sea. When the husband sees Hester's shame, he asks a man in the crowd about her and is told the story of his wife's adultery. He angrily exclaims that the child's father, the partner in the adulterous act, should also be punished and vows to find the man. He chooses a new name, Roger Chillingworth, to aid him in his plan. The Reverend John Wilson and the minister of Hester's church, Arthur Dimmesdale, question the woman, but she refuses to name her lover. After she returns to her prison cell, the jailer brings in Roger Chillingworth, a physician, to calm Hester and her child with his roots and herbs. He and Hester have an open conversation regarding their marriage and the fact that they were both in the wrong. Her lover, however, is another matter and he demands to know who it is; Hester refuses to divulge such information. He accepts this, stating that he will find out anyway, and forces her to hide that he is her husband. If she ever reveals him, he warns her, he will destroy the child's father. Hester agrees to Chillingworth's terms although she suspects she will regret it. Following her release from prison, Hester settles in a cottage at the edge of town and earns a meager living with her needlework, which is of extraordinary quality. She lives a quiet, somber life with her daughter, Pearl, and performs acts of charity for the poor. She is troubled by her daughter's unusual fascination with Hester's scarlet A. The shunning of Hester also extends to Pearl, who has no playmates or friends except her mother. As she grows older, Pearl becomes capricious and unruly. Her conduct starts rumors, and, not surprisingly, the church members suggest Pearl be taken away from Hester. Hester, hearing rumors that she may lose Pearl, goes to speak to Governor Bellingham. With him are ministers Wilson and Dimmesdale. Hester appeals to Dimmesdale in desperation, and the minister persuades the governor to let Pearl remain in Hester's care. Because Dimmesdale's health has begun to fail, the townspeople are happy to have Chillingworth, a newly arrived physician, take up lodgings with their beloved minister. Being in such close contact with Dimmesdale, Chillingworth begins to suspect that the minister's illness is the result of some unconfessed guilt. He applies psychological pressure to the minister because he suspects Dimmesdale is Pearl's father. One evening, pulling the sleeping Dimmesdale's vestment aside, Chillingworth sees a symbol that represents his shame on the minister's pale chest. Tormented by his guilty conscience, Dimmesdale goes to the square where Hester was punished years earlier. Climbing the scaffold, he admits his guilt but cannot find the courage to do so publicly.... .. The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne

the scarlet letter summary: The Scarlet Letter Evergreen Literature Books, Nathaniel Hawthorne, 2020-01-17 The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne is a real classic. You should grab it and read it to experience it yourself. Here's a simple plot to The Scarlet Letter: In Puritan Boston, Massachusetts, a crowd gathers to witness the punishment of Hester Prynne, a young woman who has given birth to a baby of unknown parentage. She is required to wear a scarlet A on her dress when she is in front of the townspeople to shame her. The letter A stands for adulteress, although this is never said explicitly in the novel. Her sentence required her to stand on the scaffold for three hours, exposed to public humiliation, and to wear the scarlet A for the rest of her life. As Hester approaches the scaffold, many of the women in the crowd are angered by her beauty and quiet dignity. When demanded and cajoled to name the father of her child, Hester refuses. As Hester looks out over the crowd, she notices a small, misshapen man and recognizes him as her long-lost husband, who has been presumed lost at sea. When the husband sees Hester's shame, he asks a man in the crowd about her and is told the story of his wife's adultery. He angrily exclaims that the child's father, the partner in the adulterous act, should also be punished and vows to find the man. He chooses a new name, Roger Chillingworth, to aid him in his plan. The Reverend John Wilson and

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the scarlet letter summary: Prentice Hall Library Nathaniel Hawthorne,

the scarlet letter summary: The Scarlet Letter "Annotated and Illustrated Book" For Children Nathaniel Hawthorne, 2020-03-22 The Scarlet Letter opens with a long preamble about how the book came to be written. The nameless narrator was the surveyor of the customhouse in Salem, Massachusetts. In the customhouse's attic, he discovered a number of documents, among them a manuscript that was bundled with a scarlet, gold-embroidered patch of cloth in the shape of an A. The manuscript, the work of a past surveyor, detailed events that occurred some two hundred years before the narrator's time. When the narrator lost his customs post, he decided to write a fictional account of the events recorded in the manuscript. The Scarlet Letter is the final product. The story begins in seventeenth-century Boston, then a Puritan settlement. A young woman, Hester Prynne, is led from the town prison with her infant daughter, Pearl, in her arms and the scarlet letter A on her breast. A man in the crowd tells an elderly onlooker that Hester is being punished for adultery. Hester's husband, a scholar much older than she is, sent her ahead to America, but he never arrived in Boston. The consensus is that he has been lost at sea. While waiting for her husband, Hester has apparently had an affair, as she has given birth to a child. She will not reveal her lover's identity, however, and the scarlet letter, along with her public shaming, is her punishment for her sin and her secrecy. On this day Hester is led to the town scaffold and harangued by the town fathers, but she again refuses to identify her child's father. The elderly onlooker is Hester's missing husband, who is now practicing medicine and calling himself Roger Chillingworth. He settles in Boston, intent on revenge. He reveals his true identity to no one but Hester, whom he has sworn to secrecy. Several years pass. Hester supports herself by working as a seamstress, and Pearl grows into a willful, impish child. Shunned by the community, they live in a small cottage on the outskirts of Boston. Community officials attempt to take Pearl away from Hester, but, with the help of Arthur Dimmesdale, a young and eloquent minister, the mother and daughter manage to stay together. Dimmesdale, however, appears to be wasting away and suffers from mysterious heart trouble, seemingly caused by psychological distress. Chillingworth attaches

himself to the ailing minister and eventually moves in with him so that he can provide his patient with round-the-clock care. Chillingworth also suspects that there may be a connection between the minister's torments and Hester's secret, and he begins to test Dimmesdale to see what he can learn. One afternoon, while the minister sleeps, Chillingworth discovers a mark on the man's breast (the details of which are kept from the reader), which convinces him that his suspicions are correct. Dimmesdale's psychological anguish deepens, and he invents new tortures for himself. In the meantime, Hester's charitable deeds and quiet humility have earned her a reprieve from the scorn of the community. One night, when Pearl is about seven years old, she and her mother are returning home from a visit to a deathbed when they encounter Dimmesdale atop the town scaffold, trying to punish himself for his sins. Hester and Pearl join him, and the three link hands. Dimmesdale refuses Pearl's request that he acknowledge her publicly the next day, and a meteor marks a dull red A in the night sky. Hester can see that the minister's condition is worsening, and she resolves to intervene.

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years pass. Hester supports herself by working as a seamstress, and Pearl grows into a willful, impish child. Shunned by the community, they live in a small cottage on the outskirts of Boston. Community officials attempt to take Pearl away from Hester, but, with the help of Arthur Dimmesdale, a young and eloquent minister, the mother and daughter manage to stay together. Dimmesdale, however, appears to be wasting away and suffers from mysterious heart trouble, seemingly caused by psychological distress. Chillingworth attaches himself to the ailing minister and eventually moves in with him so that he can provide his patient with round-the-clock care. Chillingworth also suspects that there may be a connection between the minister's torments and Hester's secret, and he begins to test Dimmesdale to see what he can learn. One afternoon, while the minister sleeps, Chillingworth discovers a mark on the man's breast (the details of which are kept from the reader), which convinces him that his suspicions are correct. Dimmesdale's psychological anguish deepens, and he invents new tortures for himself. In the meantime, Hester's charitable deeds and quiet humility have earned her a reprieve from the scorn of the community. One night, when Pearl is about seven years old, she and her mother are returning home from a visit to a deathbed when they encounter Dimmesdale atop the town scaffold, trying to punish himself for his sins. Hester and Pearl join him, and the three link hands. Dimmesdale refuses Pearl's request that he acknowledge her publicly the next day, and a meteor marks a dull red A in the night sky. Hester can see that the minister's condition is worsening, and she resolves to intervene. She goes to Chillingworth and asks him to stop adding to Dimmesdale's self-torment. Chillingworth refuses.

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Puritan values had eased somewhat by 1850, but not enough to make the novel completely welcome. It was to some degree a career-threatening decision to center his novel around an adulterous affair (but compare the plot of Fielding's *Tom Jones*). But Hawthorne was not concerned with a prurient affair here, though the novel's characters are. Hawthorne chose to leave out the details of the adulterous rendezvous between Hester and Dimmesdale entirely. Instead, he was concerned with the aftermath of the affair--the shaming of Hester, the raising of a child borne of sin, and the values of a society that would allow a sin to continue to be punished long after it would seem reasonable. Hawthorne takes advantage of his greatest assets as a writer--the interiority of his writing, his exploration of thoughts and emotions--and uses them to humanize all the parties involved in the affair, as well as to demonize the thoughts that become consumed by it. Chillingworth, notably, becomes the embodiment of Puritan values, which led people to lynch and destroy in the name of God but motivated in large measure by the people's own repressed sins of lust, greed, and envy. The *Scarlet Letter* also became intensely popular upon publication because it had the good fortune of becoming one of America's first mass-published books. Before *The Scarlet Letter*, books in America usually were handmade, sold one by one in small numbers. But Hawthorne's novel benefited from a machine press, and its first run of 2,500 copies sold out immediately. As a result, then, *The Scarlet Letter* benefited not only from its implicit controversial subject matter but also from an unusually large available readership. Readers who agreed or disagreed with the book's choices, however subtly, could spread the word. The novel became the equivalent of a seminal political tract--and the subject of endless discussion and debate, no doubt influencing social change. The novel also benefited because of Hawthorne's support and respect among New England's literary establishment (he would soon become good friends with Herman Melville). Thus, the novel became popular not only with the masses. It was heralded as appropriate reading despite its attention to adulterous love. *The Scarlet Letter* has been adapted many times on film, on television, and on the stage. The first film was a 1917 black-and-white silent film, while the most recent--and much maligned--film version opened in 1995 starring Demi Moore and Gary Oldman.

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