

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Scarlet Letter (Unabridged)

by
Nathaniel Hawthorne

Book Information

Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter (Unabridged)

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Book Level: 11.7

Interest Level: UG

This classic tale is about Hester Prynne, her lover, their child, and Hester's husband, and the effect of sin on the mind and spirit of these characters.

Topics: Behavior, Revenge; Community Life, Ethics/Morality; Family Life, Babies; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Popular Groupings, Upper Grades Popular Authors/Starred Reviews; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Series, Modern Library Classics

Main Characters

Ann Hibbins the Governor's sister, said to be a witch

Governor Bellingham a Boston official

Hester Prynne a young woman who has been found guilty of adultery in Puritan times

Pearl the illegitimate daughter of Hester Prynne and the Reverend Dimmesdale

Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale a young pastor who, unknown to all but a few, is the father of Hester's baby

Roger Chillingworth Hester's elderly husband who, after a two-year absence, arrives in Boston and asks Hester to keep his identity a secret

Vocabulary

depredations plunderings

edifice a large building

expatiate to speak or write at length

ignominious shameful, disgraceful, disreputable

inauspicious unfavorable, unsuccessful

lucubration laborious study

maw throat

mien demeanor

obeisance a bow made to show respect

physiognomies facial appearance

scourge lash or whip

vicissitude irregular, unexpected or surprising change

Synopsis

A group of Puritans gather to witness the punishment of Hester Prynne. She is to stand on a scaffold for three hours wearing the letter A on her bodice as punishment for her transgression of adultery. While she stands exposed to the crowd, young Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale gives an impassioned speech asking her to reveal the name of her baby's father. Hester never wavers in her refusal to do so. When she is taken back to her prison cell, she is visited by a "physician," whom she recognizes as her missing husband. He urges her to reveal the name of her child's father, but Hester continues her steadfast refusal. The physician, Chillingworth, asks Hester to keep his identity a secret in exchange for "not destroying" Pearl's father.

When Hester is released from prison, she unfailingly wears the A while raising her colorful daughter. When rumors arise that Pearl might be taken from her, Hester visits the governor, and the visiting Reverend Dimmesdale speaks in her behalf. Tormented by his own guilt, Dimmesdale goes to the scaffold and stands on it in the night. He is joined by Hester and Pearl, where he admits his guilt to them, but is not strong enough to admit it to the public. Meanwhile, Chillingworth had befriended Dimmesdale, becoming his personal physician and private tormentor. Hester knows that Dimmesdale's affliction is due to his guilt, and she asks Chillingworth to reveal his identity to the Reverend. Chillingworth agrees, and, in the forest, Hester reveals her husband's identity to Dimmesdale. He is upset, but forgives her and they make plans to leave Boston together to start anew in Europe. Hester casts aside the A only to discover her daughter will

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not come to her side without it on her breast. With deep sorrow, and at the Reverend's urging, she replaces the letter on her dress. The Reverend seems buoyed after Hester's revelation in the forest, and on Election Day, he gives his most inspired sermon. On the same day, Hester learns from the ship captain that Chillingworth has booked passage on the ship she, the Reverend, and her daughter are taking to England. After leaving the church, Dimmesdale makes his frail way through the crowd and ascends the scaffold with Hester's help, where he stands with her and Pearl. He confesses to his congregation that he is Pearl's father, and removes his vestments to reveal, some say, his own scarlet letter. After his astonishing confession, he dies in Hester's arms. With seemingly no further purpose in his life, Chillingworth dies within the year. Hester travels abroad with Pearl for a time before returning to Boston, where she resumes wearing her scarlet letter until her death, when she is buried next to Arthur Dimmesdale.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Who fared worse over the course of the seven years covered in the story, Arthur Dimmesdale or Hester Prynne?

Arthur, because he was privately tortured with guilt. He had the adoration of his congregation while he inwardly loathed himself, not only for his transgression, but for his weakness. He also suffered while watching Hester's public humiliation, and in knowing Pearl was his, but he was unable to let her know. In Hester's case, she had to bear the stigma of the letter every day of her life. Even when it faded from the forefront of the minds of the people of Boston, every time a visitor or stranger arrived, she was newly vilified. She had to watch as Dimmesdale went about his business as if nothing had happened, drawing the admiration of the people of Boston, while she wore the A for all to see.

Literary Analysis

In what ways did Dimmesdale change after returning from his meeting with Hester in the forest?

His church building appeared dreamlike to him. He had the urge to do something wicked. He couldn't think of a comforting Scripture for the old widow. He had an urge to teach some wicked words to a group of Puritan children.

Inferential Comprehension

How does the author infer that Dimmesdale is Pearl's father before it is actually revealed in the story?

He speaks out to Hester when she is standing on the scaffold. He speaks in Hester's defense when the Governor wants Pearl taken away from her. As the events unfold, he becomes thinner, unhealthy, and tended to press his hand over his heart.

Constructing Meaning

Where does the letter A appear in the story?

The letter A appears on Hester, of course, and Pearl constructs a seaweed version for herself. A strange A appears in the sky on the night the three meet on the scaffold. Some said Dimmesdale had an A on his chest. It appeared on the tombstone shared by Hester and Dimmesdale.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting: The setting plays a major part in the story. The Puritans had a strict set of rules that included moral behavior. Their religion was law, and their law was religion. Many transgressions that are now considered minor were then punishable by death. Create a character who has committed an offense in your community. The offense should not be too serious (armed robbery or murder), but something that is clearly wrong, like shoplifting, littering, or cheating on your income taxes. Have the character get caught, and then decide on a public punishment for the character that identifies

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his or her offense to the general population. How do the people in your town or city react? Is the character brave and defiant, or remorseful and embarrassed? Does the punishment serve as a deterrent for others?

Understanding Characterization: Hester Prynne is a strong, proud woman. In the face of adversity, she chooses to stay in the town that shuns her in order to raise her daughter in the presence of her fellow transgressor. Think of someone you know (or create a character) who was shunned by others in the community for a real or imagined transgression. How did the person deal with being an outcast? Did anyone sympathize with him or her? How did the person overcome the stigma of his or her situation?

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors: The Puritans were a group of people who left England to form a new religion. Their moral standards were strict and unwavering. Many of them were involved in the witch trials that occurred during that period. Research the history of the Puritans, and write about their rules and punishments. Draw parallels to today's moral standards, and the punishments received by those who break the laws today.

Understanding the Author's Craft: Hawthorne used an abundance of symbolism in the story. Find instances where he used darkness and light to convey a mood in the story. Discuss what Pearl represents, and how she changes throughout the story. List words that begin with the letter A to describe Hester, Dimmesdale, Chillingworth and Pearl. How did Hawthorne make use of the scaffold in the story?