

The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne: A Study Guide

1. When does the story take place? How much time is covered in the novel?
2. What three punishments are given to Hester Prynne for committing adultery?
3. What does Dimmesdale mean when he says the following to Hester as she stands on the scaffold with her baby and refuses to reveal the father of her baby?
“What can thy silence do for him, except tempt him. . . yea, compel him. . . to add hypocrisy to sin?”
4. Why has Hester’s husband not arrived in Boston during the two years since she has arrived? When does he arrive?
5. Why does her husband take the name Roger Chillingworth? What is his occupation?
6. Why is Chillingworth not angry with her for committing adultery?
7. Describe Hester’s place in the community over the years covered in the novel. Note any changes in the attitudes of the townspeople.
8. As Chillingworth seeks the identity of Hester’s lover and attempts to get revenge, his appearance changes. Describe the change. What is the unpardonable sin according to Hawthorne?
9. Describe the changes in Dimmesdale over the past years. Why is he a more effective minister? How does he attempt to punish himself for his sin of adultery? Why isn’t he relieved of the guilty feelings after the punishment?
10. Why does Hester decide to meet Dimmesdale in the forest?
11. What plans for the future do Hester and Dimmesdale make during this meeting?
12. How does Pearl react when she sees her mother without the letter on? Why does she react this way?
13. How has Dimmesdale changed as he goes back to town after the meeting with Hester in the forest? How does Hawthorne explain this change in behavior?
14. What celebration will occur in three days? What part does Dimmesdale have in it?
15. What shocking news does Hester learn from the ship’s captain the day of the celebration?
16. What different explanations are there among the townspeople for Dimmesdale’s behavior on the day of his death? What do some people claim to see? What are the explanations as to how it got there?
17. What happens to Chillingworth after Dimmesdale’s death?
18. What happens to Hester and Pearl? Why does Hester return to her cottage in Boston years later? What role does she perform in the community now? Where is she buried when she dies?
19. Consider Pearl as a symbol of (a) the sin of adultery, (b) the living letter—“the scarlet letter endowed with life,” and (c) the conscience of Hester and Dimmesdale.
20. What point is Hawthorne trying to make about sin and guilt through his portrayal of the three main characters in the novel?
21. Discuss the use of each of the following as symbol in the narrative: nature, mirrors, circles.
22. How is physical deformity or decay related to sin in the narrative?
23. Analyze the conflict between man’s law and nature’s law in the story.
24. How does Hawthorne use contrast as a literary technique in the narrative?
25. Discuss each of the following as possible theme in the narrative: sin and guilt, hypocrisy, alienation, truth.