



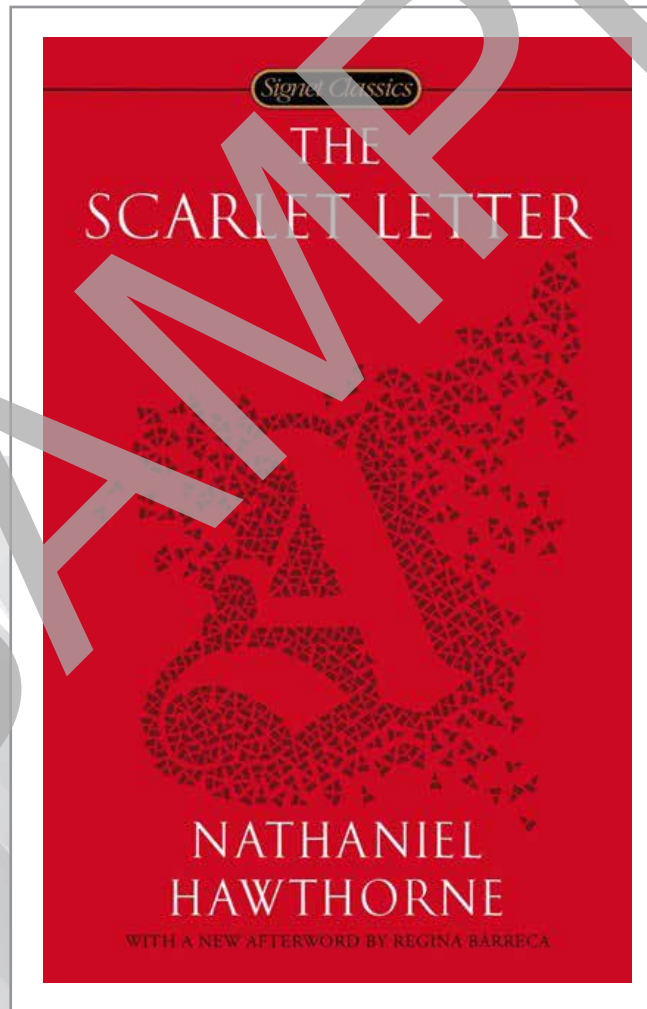
TEACHER GUIDE

GRADES 9-12

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

The Scarlet Letter

Nathaniel Hawthorne



READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT

The Scarlet Letter

Nathaniel Hawthorne

TEACHER GUIDE

NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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About the Author

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born July 4, 1804, in Salem, Massachusetts, the son of a sea captain who died when Nathaniel was only four. His mother soon moved the family to the Maine woods, where young Nathaniel enjoyed all the pleasures of being a boy in the country. Although he was a reluctant student, he graduated from Bowdoin College in 1825, adding the “w” to his last name at that time. He lived with his mother for the next twelve years, back in Salem, refining his writing skills and seeking an interested publisher.

His first book was self-published. When he realized it was doomed to failure, he recalled as many books as possible and destroyed them. He had been unable to interest a publisher in his many tales and sketches, which he hoped could be published as a collection. Instead, many of his stories appeared in newspapers and magazines, with no credit given to him. Although he began to attain a literary name for himself in 1837 with *Twice-Told Tales*, he was not able to make a living from his writing. He worked at the Custom House in Boston, but resigned after several years to join the Brook Farm Community, an early experiment in communal farming and simple living. Farm work proved harder than he expected, and he had little time for writing. He decided to move to Concord, and married Sophia Peabody, to whom he had been secretly engaged but reluctant to marry due to his financial instability. Thoreau and Emerson were their neighbors in Concord.

At this time, Hawthorne was appointed “Surveyor for the Port of Salem.” While working at the Custom House there, he obtained some of the material later presented in “The Custom House,” the introductory essay to *The Scarlet Letter*. When the Whigs won the 1848 election, Hawthorne, a Democrat, had to leave his position. In the seven months that followed, he wrote *The Scarlet Letter*, which sold well.

The Hawthornes moved to Lennox, where they became acquainted with Herman Melville. Melville was in the process of writing *Moby Dick*, which he later dedicated to Hawthorne. In the next few years, Hawthorne wrote *The House of the Seven Gables*, *The Blithedale Romance*, and *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys*.

In May of 1852, the Hawthornes were finally able to purchase a home of their own in Concord, along with nine acres of land. Here Hawthorne produced *Tanglewood Tales* and *A Life of Pierce*. The latter was written as a campaign piece for Hawthorne’s old college friend, Franklin Pierce. When Pierce was elected President, he repaid the favor by appointing Hawthorne United States Consul in England. In 1858, at the end of Pierce’s term, Hawthorne and his family spent a year in Italy, where Hawthorne gathered material for *The Marble Faun*, which he wrote the following year in England.

Back at their home in Concord, it seemed that life might finally settle to a pleasant routine for the Hawthornes—but it was not to be. Hawthorne’s health began to decline, and in 1864 he died in his sleep. Although he did not enjoy a legendary reputation during his lifetime, today he is considered one of the greatest of classic American writers.

Chapters 1-3

Vocabulary

sepulchre 55	Utopia 55	edifice 55	physiognomy 57
heterodox 57	infamy 58	autumnal 59	ignominy 61
deportment 62	countenance 64	phantasmagoric 65	visage 67
iniquity 68	tremulous 72		

Questions for Discussion:

1. What is the purpose of chapter 1? (It sets the scene and the mood of the novel.)
2. What sort of story will this be? (a "tale of human frailty and sorrow")
3. What does the rosebush symbolize? ("some sweet moral blossom," i.e., the theme or moral of the story)
4. For what sin is Hester Prynne being punished? How? (For the sin of adultery, she must wear the red letter A on her breast, and she must be subjected to public ridicule for three hours on the scaffold.)
5. Who is with Hester? (her infant daughter, Pearl)
6. How did the Puritan women act? (They were stern and sanctimonious, and some felt Hester deserved to be executed.)
7. What is Mr. Dimmesdale's attitude toward Hester? (He is more sympathetic toward Hester and asks her to name the father of the baby so he too can begin to repent.)
8. Who does Hester recognize in the crowd? Where has he been until now? (her husband, living with the Indians as a captive)
9. What vow does "the stranger" make? (to find out the name of the baby's father)

Critical Thinking for Writing and Discussion:

10. What "bitter but wholesome cup" does Dimmesdale say Hester is denying her partner in sin? (The revelation of his name would mean he could begin to make amends. Now he must live with his guilt.)

Activities:

- Most students today know someone who has had a baby out of wedlock. Through discussion, make the distinction between this situation and adultery. (Hester Prynne was married, but her husband could not be the baby's father because he had been gone for two years.)
- Have the students write answers, with explanations, to the following questions: Do you think it is a *sin* to have a child out of wedlock? Is it a *crime*? Is adultery a sin, a crime, or neither?

-
- After you have read their answers, discuss the difference in present-day society, between “sin” and “crime.” The important thing is to show the students that “sin” implies value judgement, while “crime” is defined by the legal system and even broken down into felonies and misdemeanors. In Puritan society, there was no real distinction between sin and crime, and the church was so much a part of the community that it was its task to judge and punish.

Chapters 4-6

Vocabulary

sagamores 76

ascetic 86

contumacious 90

peremptory 76

penitence 87

amenable 93

paramour 80

reviled 88

caprice 94

vivify 83

exhortation 88

anathema 96

Questions for Discussion:

1. Who did the jailer summon to help little Pearl? Why? (Roger Chillingworth. He was a scientist and herbalist, so was considered a physician. Hester was in a frenzied nervous state due to seeing him in the crowd, and Pearl was suffering from her mother's mood.)
2. Why is Hester afraid to drink what Chillingworth gives her? (She fears he may be trying to poison her out of revenge.)
3. What apology does Chillingworth make? (He blames himself for expecting her to love him.)
4. What vow does Chillingworth make? (to find the baby's father and exact revenge)
5. What does Chillingworth ask Hester to promise? Why? (He asks her not to reveal him as her husband because he would be embarrassed and dishonored if people knew he was the husband of a faithless wife.)
6. When Hester left prison, what did she have to look forward to? (She would be a symbol of sinful passion.)
7. Why didn't Hester simply leave town and pretend to be a widow with a child? (She felt compelled to stay where her sin took place and try to purge her soul.)
8. Where did Hester live? (in a cottage at the edge of town, by the sea)
9. How did Hester make a living? (doing needlework)
10. How did Hester dress? (in coarse, somber clothing) How did she dress Pearl? (fancifully)
11. How was Hester treated in town? (She was snubbed or reviled by those she helped. Clergymen often made her the subject of their sermons.)