

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Scarlet Letter

by Nathaniel Hawthorne

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The Scarlet Letter

Notes on the language of Hawthorne

The language of *The Scarlet Letter* is frequently difficult to understand. With that in mind, we have provided a vocabulary list, defined so that the meanings fit in the context in which the words are found. Some words, which have no modern meaning, were left out, and some words, though difficult, were omitted because their context made the definitions easily discernible.

The style, however, is another matter. Hawthorne uses long complicated sentences, convoluted phrasings, and lengthy passages of description. It may seem, at times, almost indecipherable. Upon a second or third, slower, careful re-reading, it is quite possible that Hawthorne's meaning will become clear. Students are encouraged not to read this novel casually, but slowly and closely.

Objectives

By the end of the Unit, the student will be able to:

1. discuss the Puritan setting of this novel and discuss at least three features of the Puritan community.
2. explain how this story has relevance for modern readers. In your explanation, discuss these two points:
 - a. *The Scarlet Letter* is a psychological story about sin and the consequences of sin.
 - b. *The Scarlet Letter* is a morality story about sin and redemption.
3. identify and discuss at least three characteristics of Hawthorne's writing that are part of the Romantic tradition.
4. recognize the following literary elements:
 - a. protagonist
 - b. antagonist
 - c. rising action
 - d. climax
5. identify at least three symbols in the novel and explain how each one is developed.
6. discuss the style of narraion in *The Scarlet Letter*.
7. explain and discuss the following themes and motifs:
 - a. The town's representation of social restriction versus the forest's representation of freedom and advancement.
 - b. The psychological effects that sin has on the four major characters in this story
 - c. The moral consequences of sin and how one may achieve redemption
 - d. The dual aspects of Hester's punishment:
 - the psychological stigmatism of the scarlet letter.
 - Pearl's role as a living symbol.
 - e. The conflict of good versus evil.
 - f. Hester Prynne as one of literature's first feminists.
 - g. Chillingworth as a personification of evil.
8. discuss the significance of the title.
9. explain aspects of dramatic irony found in the novel.
10. describe the prevalent mood of the novel and how it changes.
11. expound authentic elements of the novel such as historical figures, events, and setting.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Identify the sin of Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth, and trace the consequences of that sin on the person's life and character.
2. It is hard to believe today that a community would treat one of its members the way in which Hester was treated. What features of the Boston society in 1642, however, make the actions of the Puritans quite understandable?
3. Despite the difference in clothing and customs, how do the psychological and moral aspects of this story make it very relevant for today's readers?
4. Identify and explain at least three ways in which Hawthorne is part of the Romantic tradition and at least two ways in which he repudiates that tradition.
5. For what reasons would Hawthorne call his story a romance rather than a novel?
6. Name three characteristics of Hawthorne's style and cite examples of each.
7. Identify and explain the symbolism for each of the following items:
 - a. light and shadow
 - b. the scaffold
 - c. the rosebush and the weeds
 - d. the letter "A"
 - e. colors
 - f. the forest
 - g. the town
8. Explain Hawthorne's view on human nature regarding passion.
9. According to Hawthorne, what are the moral consequences of sin and how does one become redeemed? Cite incidents from the story.
10. Show that Hester is one of literature's first feminists using examples from the text.
11. Explain how the second scene on the scaffold serves as the novel's climax.
12. Consider the characters Pearl, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth. How are their names symbolic?

Background Lecture

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE 1804-1864

- Born in Salem, Massachusetts
- His ancestors were wealthy, influential people. One, William Hathorne, became a judge who persecuted Quakers; another, John Hathorne, sentenced many Salem women to death for witchcraft. Hawthorne was obsessed with the sins of these ancestors who reflected the religious intolerance of a puritanical society.
- The death of Hawthorne's father when Nathaniel was four resulted in a series of unfortunate circumstances that created a lonely childhood for the boy.
- Hawthorne graduated from Bowden College, Maine, and spent the next twelve years in seclusion as he struggled to become a writer.
- In 1837 he published *Twice Told Tales* and earned great national fame. His stories won the admiration of Edgar Allan Poe, who considered Hawthorne a genius.
- Another contemporary of Hawthorne, Herman Melville, who wrote *Moby Dick*, became Hawthorne's close friend. They both reacted to the Transcendental philosophers of the nineteenth century.
- During his life, Hawthorne was friendly with the Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau; however, Hawthorne could not accept what he considered the overly optimistic ideas of the Transcendentalists.

Chapter 1

VOCABULARY

allot – to divide or distribute in shares
congenial – pleasant, friendly
edifice – building
inauspicious – not prosperous or promising
ponderous – weighty
sepulchers – burial vaults
utopia – place or state of political or social perfection

1. What is the setting of *The Scarlet Letter*?

2. Nathaniel Hawthorne describes a prison, a cemetery, ugly weeds, and a wild rosebush. Explain the symbolism of each of these items.

3. What is the mood of *The Scarlet Letter*?

Chapter 7

VOCABULARY

cabalistic – of an esoteric doctrine or mysterious art
eminence – prominence; superiority
extant – not destroyed or lost
imperious – commanding; dominant
intrinsic – originating or situated within
pallid – pale; dull
pristine – uncorrupted; pure
relinquish – to leave behind; to give up
subsistence – existence
tome – volume forming part of a larger work
wan – pale or sickly

1. Why does Hester go to the governor's house?

2. How is Pearl dressed, and what is her dress compared to?

3. Explain the incident with the breastplate.

Chapter 14

VOCABULARY

propinquity – nearness in place or time
usurp – to seize by force

1. In what way does Chillingworth look like a devil?

2. Why does Chillingworth think he has a double reason for punishing Dimmesdale?

3. What pleas of Hester's arouse sympathy and admiration in Chillingworth?

4. What does Hester ask of Chillingworth? What is his response?

5. Does Chillingworth seem to be in control of his fate or controlled by his fate?

Chapter 20

VOCABULARY

comport – to conduct or behave

grandam– old woman; grandmother

gratuitous – without apparent reason or justification

introspection – the examination of one’s own mental and emotional state

irrefragable – not to be disputed or contested

obeisance – a bodily gesture, such as a bow, that expresses respect

potentate – one who wields controlling power

stupefied – astonished

vicissitude – changing circumstances

1. Describe the minister’s wicked impulses as he returns to town.

2. Why is Dimmesdale suddenly behaving wickedly?

3. What does Dimmesdale wonder when he pauses in the street?

4. Has Dimmesdale committed a deadly sin by planning to escape with Hester?
