Summer Reading Study Guide

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*

Required reading for Honors American Literature (English 10)

Important Note: The Custom House Introductory to *The Scarlet Letter* is **not** part of the required reading. You may choose to read the introduction if you wish.

*The Scarlet Letter* is considered by many literary experts to be this country’s greatest fictional work depicting the Puritan time period. Published in 1850, the novel takes place in Boston around 1640 over a period of seven years. Though sin is certainly at the heart of the novel, Hawthorne is far more interested in *how* the main characters deal with sin than he is the act of sin itself. Keeping this in mind will lead you to a better understanding of major themes in the novel. Because *The Scarlet Letter* is one of America’s first symbolic novels, you should keep in mind what symbolism is. Symbolism is an economic method an author uses to help him/her reveal theme to the reader. An author uses an object to represent or suggest a deeper meaning. The object working as the symbol must literally exist in the novel and evoke for the reader a deeper, more profound meaning beyond the object itself. The color of Hester Prynne’s letter “A” for example is symbolic as is the letter itself. The deeper meaning of the letter will change throughout the novel.

This study guide will help your comprehension and understanding of *The Scarlet Letter* but it cannot possibly include every important detail in the novel. Read closely. Feel free to print out a copy and make any notations on it you deem necessary. (You may also want to make notations in a separate notebook.) Always include page numbers to allow easy access back to important passages. The page numbers cited herein are based on the Perma-Bound 1987 edition. Your particular copy may not match these page numbers so again, make sure you make your own clear citations. Good luck and see you in August. (Bring this study guide and your novel with you on the first day of school. Remember, you will be tested over your summer reading novels upon your return to school.)

**Chapters 1-4**

1. In addition to a church and a cemetery, what edifice do the Puritans build upon arrival in the New World?

2. What might the rosebush in Chapter One symbolize?

3. Were Hester Prynne’s punishment left to the judgment of several Puritan women, what would Hester’s punishment be?

4. Citing the text, provide a physical description of Hester Prynne as she prepares to begin her punishment.
5. Why does the appearance of the letter “A” on Hester’s dress offend the townspeople?

6. Who is with Hester during the course of her time on the scaffold?

7. Describe the individual on Hester’s mind at the end of Chapter Two. Based on the description in the text, draw a conclusion or two about this individual.

8. This very individual appears in Chapter Three and is indeed Hester’s husband. How does he learn of the sin for which she is being punished?

9. Why has he been absent from Hester’s life?

10. What does Hester absolutely refuse to reveal to her husband Roger Chillingworth?

11. Arthur Dimmesdale is Hester’s reverend. What does he attempt to convince her to do?

12. When Chillingworth visits Hester in prison, he calms her wailing baby. What does Hester fear he may do to her infant daughter and why does she believe this?

13. Chillingworth tells Hester they have “wronged each other” and that his “was the first wrong” (72). Explain what he means by this.

14. On whom will Chillingworth seek his vengeance?

15. What promise does Chillingworth request of Hester? Why do you think she grants it?
Chapters 5-8

16. Now that Hester Prynne has been released from prison, what must she summon the courage to either withstand or “sink beneath”?

17. Provide at least two reasons given for Hester remaining in Boston. Why, in other words, doesn’t she leave this place where townspeople look upon her as a woman of shame and not worthy of their company?

18. How does Hester earn a living to support herself and her infant daughter, Pearl?

19. What is the one item Hester is never called upon to make? In your view, why not?

20. At times, when Hester enters a church, it is difficult for her to listen to the sermon. Why?

21. What “new sense” does Hester feel the scarlet letter has “endowed her with”? Do you think this is a negative or positive consequence of her sin? Explain.

22. According to the omniscient narrator, why does Hester name her daughter Pearl? Is Pearl’s name an example of symbolism? Why or why not?

23. Hawthorne writes that Pearl “could not be made amenable to rules” (87). What is his explanation for this? Why is she an “imp of evil” who often throws stones at other Puritan children when they refuse to associate with her? (90).

24. When Hester visits Governor Bellingham’s mansion to deliver a pair of gloves, she has a far more important reason to visit. What is it?
25. What is the deeper meaning in the following quote Hester speaks to Pearl and what is the symbol used to convey that deeper meaning: ‘Thou must gather thine own sunshine. I have none to give thee!’ (100)?

26. We learn in Chapter Eight that Roger Chillingworth has been spending a lot of time with Reverend Dimmesdale. Why?

27. What is Hester’s argument for allowing her to keep Pearl in her care?

28. At Hester’s request, Rev. Dimmesdale argues in favor of Pearl remaining with Hester. Detail the reasoning of his convincing argument.

29. To where is Hester invited by Mistress Hibbins and why does Hester decline the invitation?

Chapters 9-11

30. The physical description of a Hawthorne character will often reflect or parallel that individual’s inner character. If this is so, what conclusions might one draw about Rev. Dimmesdale’s inner character based on this description of his outer appearance:

“...his cheek was paler and thinner. ...his voice more tremulous than before. ...it had now become a constant habit. ...to press his hand over his heart. ...” (118).

Do the same for this description of Roger Chillingworth:

“...one of [his] shoulders rose higher than the other. ...A writhing horror twisted itself across his features, like a snake gliding swiftly over them” (58).
31. Chillingworth tells Dimmesdale that he will feel better and his health will improve if he simply reveals “the secrets...buried within his heart” (127). What is Dimmesdale’s reaction to this advice?

32. Why, according to Chillingworth, is Hester Prynne in less pain than Dimmesdale?

33. Reread the last five paragraphs of Chapter 10. They can be difficult or at least confusing. Hawthorne is indicating to us that Dimmesdale has somehow inflicted his own “A” on the skin of his chest. Chillingworth no doubt now believes that he has discovered the sin troubling Rev. Dimmesdale. What is Rev. Dimmesdale’s secret sin?

34. In this final scene of Chapter 10, Hawthorne actually places more emphasis on Chillingworth than Dimmesdale. What is Chillingworth’s physical and emotional reaction to his discovery about Dimmesdale and what does this reaction reveal about the type of man Chillingworth is?

35. What intellectual commitment does Chillingworth then make in regard to Dimmesdale?

36. What effect does Rev. Dimmesdale’s increased guilt and internal suffering have on his vocation as a minister to his congregation? Do you find this ironic or not? Explain.

37. What is an “act of penance”? Identify a private penance of Dimmesdale’s.

38. In Chapter 12, Dimmesdale makes a vain attempt to seek public penance. How does he do this and why can’t it possibly work?

39. What question does Pearl ask of Rev. Dimmesdale and why does she laugh at his answer?

40. Who leads Rev. Dimmesdale home that night? Is this difficult to believe? Explain.
41. What is the explanation given for the appearance of a letter “A” in that night’s sky?

Chapters 13-17

42. It has been seven years since Hester’s sin of adultery. According to many townspeople, Hester’s scarlet “A” now stands for what? Why?

43. Explain the major difference in Hester’s physical appearance.

44. Hawthorne writes that Hester’s life had turned from “passion and feeling” to what? (100)

45. Whom is Hawthorne describing when he writes the following passage and what important theme might this passage help to reveal:

“This unhappy person had effected such a transformation by devoting himself, for seven years, to the constant analysis of a heart full of torture, and deriving his enjoyment thence, and adding fuel to those fiery tortures which he analyzed and gloated over” (166).

46. What earlier promise to Chillingworth does Hester confess to him she must now break and why?

47. According to Pearl, why does Hester wear the scarlet letter?
Chapters 17-20

48. Hester tells Dimmesdale that perhaps he has not served penitence by confessing openly to his sin but that he has served it in another way. How?

49. Dimmesdale finds great relief looking into Hester’s eyes. Why? What is she able to see that others do not?

50. Once Hester reveals to Arthur Dimmesdale that Chillingworth was once indeed her husband, Dimmesdale says, “Woman, woman, thou art accountable for this! I cannot forgive thee!” Is this a fair response on Dimmesdale’s part? Explain your answer.

51. Why, according to Dimmesdale, is Chillingworth’s sin much greater than Dimmesdale or Hester’s? What is Chillingworth’s sin?

52. What advice does Hester give Dimmesdale at the end of Chapter 17? Will he be able to gather the strength to do as she suggests? Why or why not?

53. Hawthorne clearly suggests why Hester is stronger than Dimmesdale. Explain.

54. What physical transformation occurs when Hester removes the scarlet letter?

55. What is occurring in the following passage and why?

She “burst into a fit of passion, gesticulating violently, and throwing her small figure into the most extravagant contortions. She accompanied this wild outbreak with piercing shrieks, which the woods reverberated on all sides. . .” (206)
56. What does Pearl really want from Rev. Dimmesdale as suggested by the following: “Will he [Dimmesdale] go back with us, hand in hand, we three together, into the town?”

57. What does Pearl do after Rev. Dimmesdale kisses her forehead?

58. What outward and inward changes occur for Dimmesdale as he strolls home after his meeting with Hester?

59. What does Dimmesdale tell Chillingworth upon arriving home?

60. What does Dimmesdale toss into the fire and begin to rewrite?

Chapters 21-24

61. What event is celebrated in the chapter titled, “The New England Holiday”?

62. Hester learns that the ship on which she, Pearl, and Arthur have secured passage to Bristol will also carry another traveler. Who is that traveler and should this surprise the reader? Why or why not?

63. Identify the speaker of this passage:

‘“Dost thou think I have been to the forest so many times, and have yet no skill to judge who else has been there?”’

What does the speaker mean by this and why would Hawthorne include it?
64. With what decision does Dimmesdale finally escape the evil vengeance of Chillingworth?

65. Do you think this is the only way to escape Chillingworth? Explain.


67. How does Pearl become “the richest heiress of her day” (255)?

68. Hester and Pearl leave Boston for a very long time. Why, in old age, does Hester return to once again take up lodging in her small cottage? (Cite the text within your answer.) Draw a conclusion as to why Pearl does not join her.

69. Hester Prynne is buried in Boston. Specifically detail her burial site. What is interesting about it?

70. Which character—Hester, Dimmesdale, Chillingworth, or Pearl—is Hawthorne most critical of and why?