A Teaching Guide to

The Scarlet Letter

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

by

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ABSTRACT

After having taught the Scarlet Letter during student teaching, I felt that there was some need for a handbook or teaching guide which secondary teachers could use as a basis from which to develop lesson plans. This thesis, therefore, is intended to provide such a teaching guide.

The paper includes general critical discussion of individual chapters, themes, characters, symbols, structure, imagery, and style. Only very basic and generally accepted critical comments are presented; the function of this thesis being not to provide new insight on the book but rather to condense materials into a useable form. Sample test questions are also provided for the use of secondary English teachers.

I wish to express my appreciation to Dr. Edward F. Foster for his unfailing patience and assistance during the writing of this thesis.
Ancestry

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born into a family with a New England Puritan background. The first member of the family to set foot in America was William Hathorne, who emigrated from England in 1630. He was part of the group which founded the Massachusetts colony, and he became a political leader. As magistrate, he is primarily remembered for his persecution of Quakers.

William's son, John Hathorne, succeeded his father as magistrate and was one of the three judges at the Salem witch trials in 1692. According to tradition, a curse was placed on the family by one of those on trial. It was seemingly effective for the Hathorne line fell into relative obscurity, and Hawthorne's early life was spent in relative poverty and solitude.1

Chronological Table

1804 Born in Salem, Massachusetts, July 4, the second of three children.
1808 His father, a sea captain, dies of yellow fever in Surinam.
1813 An injury to his foot confines Hawthorne to the house for two years and promotes an interest in reading.
1818 His family moves to Raymond, Maine for one year.
1819 They return to Salem, and Hawthorne begins preparation for college.
1821-5 Attends Bowdoin College with Longfellow and Franklin Pierce, and graduates eighteenth in a class of thirty-five.
1825 Returns to his mother's home in Salem, and, instead of entering his uncle's counting house, he lives in relative seclusion for the next twelve years, devoting himself to writing.
1828 Publishes his first novel, Fanshawe: A Tale, anonymously and at his own expense, and then completely dissociates himself from it.
1830-7 Writes over one hundred tales and sketches, all of them anonymous or pseudonymous, published in magazines, newspapers, and annuals.
1836-7 Edits the *American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge* and writes Peter Parley's *Universal History* for his publisher.

1837 Publishes *Twice-Told Tales*, which Longfellow reviews enthusiastically.

1838 Becomes engaged to Sophia Peabody, a semi-invalid.

1839 Receives his first political appointment as weigher and gauger in the Boston Custom House.

1841 Lives for about eight months in the utopian community of Brook Farm, hoping to provide a home there for Sophia Peabody.

1842 Publishes an enlarged edition of *Twice-Told Tales*, as well as *Biographical Stories*, and, on July 9, marries Sophia Peabody.

1842-5 Lives at the Old Manse, in Concord, comes to know Emerson and Thoreau, and continues to write tales and sketches published separately in magazines.

1845 Edits and writes an introduction for *Journal of an African Cruiser*, by his friend Horatio Bridge.

1846 Publishes *Mosses from an Old Manse*.

1846-9 Receives a political appointment as Surveyor in the Salem Custom House and writes very little. He is discharged from the office in June, 1849 by the new Whig administration.

1850 Publishes *The Scarlet Letter*, is immediately celebrated as America's leading literary genius, and enters his most productive years as a writer. Moves to Lenox, Massachusetts, where he and Melville become friends.

1851-2 Publishes *The House of Seven Gables*, *The Snow-Image* and *Other Twice-Told Tales*, *A Wonder Book for Boys and Girls*, *The Blithedale Romance*, and *True Stories from History and Biography*. The last of three children is born (Una, Julian, and Rose), and the family moves to West Newton, Massachusetts, near Boston. Buys "The Wayside" in Concord in 1852 and moves there with his family. Writes the campaign biography of Franklin Pierce, who is elected President.

1853 Publishes *Tanglewood Tales for Girls and Boys*. Receives from President Pierce an appointment as United States Consul at Liverpool, where he lives until 1857.


1858-9 Travels through France and by sea to Italy; spends spring, 1858 in Rome and that summer in Florence, where he starts writing *The Marble Faun*. Returns to England the next year.

1860 Publishes *The Marble Faun*, his last completed romance. Attempts unsuccessfully to write several others—*Dr. Grimshawe's Secret*, *The Ancestral Footstep*, *Septimus Felton*, and *The Dolliver Romance*. Returns to "The wayside" in Concord.


1864 Dies in May on a tour of New Hampshire for his health and is buried in Sleepy Hollow, Concord.
BACKGROUND ON PURITANISM

The Puritan era in American history occurred between approximately 1620 and 1740 and centered in the New England area, particularly around Massachusetts Bay. Religion was the moving force of Puritan society, and the church was the dominant institution in secular as well as spiritual life. Basic principles of Puritanism can be summarized as follows:

(1) God is the unlimited, complete authority of the universe, and His will is revealed in the Bible.

(2) God directly intervenes in the activities of the world, and his intervention is called Providence. The Puritans were constantly searching for signs of God's will, and they analyzed all events and phenomena in terms of His will.

(3) All men are born in sin because of Adam's Fall at the beginning of time. Consequently, all men deserve to be damned. (This principle is called "Natural Depravity"). Sin was a fact of life for the Puritans, and they sought to fight it in all forms. Punishment of sin was therefore a public affair in which the whole community took part.

(4) God in His mercy selects some men to be saved from damnation; nothing that man does, however, can influence God's decision. God's grace was the only salvation. Being selected was known as election, and this idea is called the Doctrine of the Elect. There was no way of knowing whether one was a member of the elect; a religious "experience"—personal divine revelation—
was the only positive proof of election. This personal conviction was necessary for membership in the church. Therefore, an element of doubt and questioning was always an undertone of the religion.

(5) Anything which stirred the emotions or was sensual was sinful. Puritans lived a systematic and carefully controlled life, which was directed toward God, not toward their fellow men.
DISCUSSION OF CHAPTERS

The Custom House

"The Custom House" is Hawthorne's introduction to The Scarlet Letter, and as such it establishes (or attempts to establish) historical background and validity, themes, and symbols of the story.

Hawthorne attempts to give historical bases for the book through the descriptions of his Puritan ancestors and their strict customs. He particularly notes the severity, sternness, and "persecuting spirit" which were important parts of their characters. Thus, he provides a basis for the actions of the Puritan community in the story. Hawthorne also attempts to establish the realism of the plot structure by describing documents pertaining to Hester Prynne which were supposedly found in the Salem Custom House, a public institution. The use of names and time periods also helps to verify the book.

The themes of sin and punishment are introduced in the descriptions of Hawthorne's Puritan forefathers and in the descriptions of the documents. The symbol of the scarlet letter is strictly brought to the foreground as Hawthorne describes its appearance in sharp detail, as well as his reaction when he placed it against his own chest.

"The Custom House" also gives the background of events which surrounded the writing of the romance and attempts to establish Hawthorne's ability as a writer.
Chapter 1

The title of this chapter, the "Prison-Door," is very appropriate as the entire chapter serves as a "door" to the rest of the story. In this short sketch, Hawthorne presents images and themes which will be developed as the story progresses, and he establishes the prevailing mood of the book.

The first paragraph immediately gives the reader an impression of darkness and heaviness. Hawthorne describes a crowd of people wearing clothes that are "sad-colored" and gray, facing a door "heavily timbered" and "studded with iron spikes." In the second paragraph, the author focuses on three areas in Boston: The prison, the cemetery, and the church-yard, and these areas are closely associated with each other. The ideas of sin, death, and salvation are thus suggested and will become central themes.

The prison, an important symbol, is described in terms of darkness and heaviness. Despite the youthfulness of the community, the prison has already taken on the aspects of age and antiquity.

Flower and weed imagery is introduced as Hawthorne focuses on the weed plot and rose-bush in front of the prison. Color imagery of red and black is also introduced.

The rose-bush is the one bright image in this chapter, and it is identified with Pearl throughout the story, who is the sole symbol of hope. The brightness of the rose-bush, however, is overshadowed by the darkness of the other imagery presented,
against the code which condemns her. It (and thus the sin it represents) has the effect of taking Hester out of the common sphere of humanity and isolating her from others. The scaffold, the other major symbol, is representative of the punishment of sin. It is described in terms of weight and darkness, and Hawthorne places it directly beneath the eaves of the church, again pointing out the Puritans' obsession with sin and the closeness of their religion and their law.

By the comparison of Hester and Pearl with the Madonna and Child, Hawthorne emphasizes the despair and sorrow which surround the two, and which are the results of sin. Hester begins a mental review of the life she has led which shows the reader some of her background, and the character of Roger Chillingworth is introduced in her thoughts. His intelligence and his probing nature are emphasized, and Hawthorne dwells on his deformed body, foreshadowing the deformity which his soul will assume. Arthur Dimmesdale is also mentioned, and his concern with Hester and his godliness is pointed out.

Chapter 3

This chapter is the first of the crucial scaffold scenes. Chillingworth first appears and the characteristic most emphasized in his description is his intelligence. The snake-like expression which crosses his face as he recognizes Hester reveals the hidden twisted nature which is to emerge and, also, reminds one of the Satanic serpent and indicates the devilish nature of the man. There is constant foreshadowing in his actions and his
speech. He prefers to remain unknown; his first gesture to Hester is one of silence. He hints of the need for the discovery of the partner of Hester's sin, and one sees his determination to find that person even at this point.

The other major figure in the drama, Arthur Dimmesdale, is also described in this chapter. He is noted first of all for his godliness, and one can see that he is held in high esteem. He is described as being very emotional, sensitive, melancholic, withdrawn, and very religious. He is isolated from those around him as Hester is isolated on her scaffold, and this condition is a result of his sin. His plea to Hester is the greatest irony of the book, for, unknown to the crowd, he is pleading for himself. Dimmesdale is asking Hester to make an acknowledgment of sin which he himself is too weak to make. The speech is indicative of the hypocrisy which will become a part of him.

The minor characters of Governor Bellingham and Rev. Wilson are symbols of aspects of Puritan culture. Wilson is symbolic of the church, and his close association with Bellingham, symbol of the state, emphasizes again the interweaving of religion and law in Puritanism. The two are fit leaders of the community for they are both severe and rigid in their attitudes.

The symbols of Pearl and the letter are developed in this chapter. Pearl, while remaining symbolic of Hester's sin, also becomes symbolic of her inner seething and agony; her cries are manifestations of Hester's emotions. As she raises her arms to Dimmesdale, she also represents acknowledgment of sin. The letter
becomes legendary and assumes an awful and hellish aspect in the eyes of the community. As pointed out by Chillingworth, it will make Hester a living sermon and example of sin, to be pointed out to all.

Chapter 4

This is the first of the scenes which focuses on two characters together, and in it one sees Hester and Chillingworth's relationships.

Hester's immediate reaction to Chillingworth is one of fear and mistrust. She is already aware of the likelihood of his revenge, and she fears for the child and herself. Chillingworth, however, expresses his desire for Hester to live, so that his revenge may be carried out through the shame of the scarlet letter.

Chillingworth is seen in the role of the wronged husband. Hester has committed a sin against him, and she is fully aware of it. However, her husband admits that he, too, is partly at fault. Their marriage was wrong for their relationship was false and unnatural, without love. He made the first mistake; nevertheless, he desires revenge on her partner in sin. In this chapter, therefore, one sees Chillingworth as he has been—a cold scholar who made a vain attempt to bring human warmth into his life—and as he will be—a man of secrecy, obsessed with the need for revenge; who will use his intelligence to control his victim; and who will become, in short, a devil.

Hester and Chillingworth are bound together in an oath of secrecy to which Hester agrees only because of the threat toward
the man she loves. As will be seen, this concealment of identity will be the downfall, ironically, of both the victim and the victimizer.

Pearl is again seen as the symbol of Hester's inner turmoil and agony.

Chapter 5

This is an expository chapter which explains and describes Hester's life after her release from prison and the effect of the scarlet letter on her existence.

The scarlet letter becomes the burden which Hester must carry every day; she becomes the embodiment of sin for the community. The letter, representative of sin, isolates her both physically and spiritually. She lives alone, away from the town, and her only contact with others comes about through her needlework. Nothing makes Hester feel as if she belongs or is accepted by the community. Instead, she is constantly reminded of the sin which sets her apart. The letter enables Hester to feel sympathetic with and to recognize the sin found in every man. At this point, however, Hester struggles to believe in the good of mankind.

In spite of these agonies, Hester does not leave Boston. Three reasons are given: she is still a part of the society which condemned her, and her sin strongly binds her to it; the father of Pearl and her lover is also part of that society; and she rationalizes that some heavenly forgiveness might be attained by the acceptance of her earthly punishment. Outwardly, therefore,
Hester accepts her punishment. This acceptance is shown in her rejection of the pleasure of fanciful and beautiful needlework. She herself wears only the plainest clothing. However, Hester inwardly rebels against her punishment, and this defiance is expressed in the gorgeous outfits in which she dresses Pearl, symbol of her sin. Hester also refuses to pray for the puritans for fear that her prayer might become a curse.

Hawthorne, in this chapter, also presents the scarlet letter in a new form. It is not legendary and is thought to glow in the dark with fire from hell.

Chapter 6

This chapter is a description of Pearl and is a companion piece to Chapter 5. Pearl is named so because her mother feels that she was purchased with a great price, and the name also expresses Hester's defiance of the community's condemnation. In spite of her love for Pearl, though, Hester fears that because her sin was evil, Pearl, the result of that sin, will also be evil.

Pearl is described as being a radiant beauty, willful and capricious. Hawthorne repeatedly points out her passionate nature which is the evidence of Hester's passion. Pearl is a symbol of Hester's sin, her hidden rebellion (which expresses itself in the vivid, fanciful clothing which Pearl wears), her inner turmoil, her passionate nature, and her subdued beauty.

From the beginning, the child is associated with the scarlet letter. It is the first thing which she notices about her mother as an infant, and later she amuses herself by throwing wild flowers
at it. She is herself the embodiment of the letter, the living symbol of sin, punishment, and eventually redemption. She is thus both pleasure and pain for her mother.

Her use as a symbol is emphasized by her lack of human qualities. She is described as being a fairy, an elf, a sprite, and an imp. The people of the town believe her to be a demon-child, and Hester herself questions her origin when she imagines a fiend peering from the child's eyes.

Pearl is also isolated by Hester's sin. She refuses to play with other children and, as an outcast, she has a passionate hatred for her peers. This hatred is acted out while she plays, as natural objects become townspeople whom she destroys.

Chapter 7

Hawthorne uses this expository chapter to develop the characters of Hester and Pearl and to develop symbols and imagery.

Again, the passionate defiance and independence of Hester's character is emphasized. She goes to the Governor's house to fight for the child, regardless of societal prejudice. She expresses her proud rebellion in the dress of Pearl, which is deliberately made to look like the letter. Yet, a little later in the chapter, one sees how that letter has hidden her individuality. When Hester looks into the mirror-like surface of the armor, the scarlet letter is magnified greatly and becomes the most prominent part of her features. This magnification is symbolic of the exaggerated awareness of sin in Puritan culture, as well as emphasizing the centrality of Hester's punishment in her life. She seems hardly able to exist without its presence.
The ambiguity of Pearl as a symbol is also developed in this chapter. She is seen most forcefully as the embodiment of the scarlet letter and all that it stands for because of her scarlet and gold dress. Her passion and beauty are also brought out, as is the illusive devilish side of her character. Her potential for life, hope, and redemption are also pointed out when she calls for sunshine and roses, symbols of promise and life. It should be noted, however, that Hester is unable to give her daughter these things.

This chapter also contains excellent description of the Governor's mansion. It is interesting to notice that despite the sunshine on the outside of the house, one still sees the exaggeration of the mirror on the inside of it, two conflicting symbolic images.

Chapter 8

This chapter serves the dual purpose of development of characters and bringing the reader up-to-date. Three years have elapsed; all of the main characters and the important minor ones are present in a public confrontation.

One sees again Hester's not entirely subdued passions in her determination to keep the child or to resign herself to evil altogether. She points out that she is gaining wisdom from her "badge of shame" which will help her to find a place in humanity and a kind of salvation. Pearl is both an instrument of that salvation and of Hester's punishment. One also sees Pearl as a symbol of love, hope, and life when she says that she was plucked off of a rosebush, and when she kisses Birnesdale's hand.
The character changes in Dimmesdale and Chillingworth are made note of. Hester cannot help but notice the ugliness, deformity, and darkness which now appears in Chillingworth's face; all serve as indications of his deterioration into evil. On the other hand, the frailty, melancholy, and emancipation of Dimmesdale's face, indicates the growing guilt which torments his soul.

The presence of Bellingham and Wilson indicate the never-changing existence of the Puritan church and state in human affairs. The appearance of Mistress Hibbins serves as a reminder of the possibility of evil in all men.

Chapter 9

This is a narrative chapter which brings the reader up-to-date on the life of Chillingworth and describes his increasingly intimate relationship with Dimmesdale, as well as public opinion of his presence.

Chillingworth's intelligence is again demonstrated in the resourcefulness with which he attaches himself to the townspeople and to Dimmesdale (as a leech attaches itself to a human body.) One learns of the physical deterioration of Dimmesdale, caused by his increasing guilt. Hawthorne gives the reader some insight into Dimmesdale's personality which somewhat accounts for his shame: a mind which dwells on ideas until they are completely comprehended and the necessity of faith for his peace of mind, which would, of course, be threatened by realization of his sin.

Hawthorne also shows the reader the progress which Chillingworth makes in his desire to know the minister up to the point where he is able to scrutinize Dimmesdale's every movement;
one sees evidence of the searching, curious, probing mind which eventually will cause his own downfall.

The fiendishness of Chillingworth character is foreshadowed by the town's increasing suspicion that he is a devil in disguise, sent to test the saintly young minister.

Chapter 10

In this chapter, Hawthorne reveals the lowest depths of Chillingworth's movement toward evil, as well as the nature of his relationship with Dimmesdale. Here, too, is the first suggestion of confession which will save Dimmesdale's soul, and Hawthorne thus turns from the life of Hester to the examination of the conflict and struggles in Dimmesdale's character.

Chillingworth's desire for revenge has taken over his mind and soul completely. His sole purpose and activity is the searching and prying in Dimmesdale's mind which he hopes will reveal the minister's guilt. Hawthorne reminds the reader of Chillingworth's nature before he allowed the desire for revenge to possess him: he was kind, calm, and upright. His original intentions in the search for the father were not evil in nature; he wanted only the truth. However, he has since become fascinated and obsessed with Dimmesdale as a curious specimen of human nature and therefore subject to experimentation. He begins to examine the minister for "the art's sake," for his own knowledge, and he is thus well on the way to committing Hawthorne's Unpardonable Sin. He is rapidly becoming a fiend, and Pearl accurately labels him the "Black Man" who has "got hold of the minister..."
Dimmesdale is becoming engulfed in his guilt as Chillingworth is engulfed in his revenge. He can trust no man, for he knows himself to be false. He also realizes the salvation and peace which he could find in confession of sin, yet he offers several reasons why such confession may be impossible. He is an unwilling hypocrite whose fears keep him from that which he most craves—the Truth.

The symbols of Pearl and the scarlet letter are further developed in this chapter. Pearl is seen as different from the rest of humanity; she does not respect the graves she dances over. Her freedom, isolation and seemingly uncanny perception are noted. The scarlet letter is shown in another manner; Pearl covers it with burrs, and the unsightly vegetation adheres to it readily. Another example of unnatural or unsightly vegetation is found in the black weeds which Chillingworth discovers, and which serve to emphasize his evil and the sin which struggles to be revealed in every man.

Chapter 11

This short expository chapter serves the purpose of bringing the reader up-to-date on Dimmesdale's suffering and growing insanity and also of demonstrating Chillingworth's complete submission to his obsession with revenge.

Dimmesdale becomes a toy which the physician can play with. He determines to become Dimmesdale's closest friend, thus making his revenge greater, and one sees his increasing pleasure in the torture of the minister. His own wretchedness, however, is also pointed out.

One learns in this chapter of the extent of Dimmesdale's
suffering in his struggle with guilt. Perhaps his greatest torment is his love of truth, for he ironically finds it impossible to be otherwise than a hypocrite. He longs to confess and relieve his sufferings, but he is too weak to do so. He can only make confessions which are half-true and ambiguous, thus increasing his pain. His suffering is also intensified by the growth of his public esteem. As he becomes more and more intwined in his own weaknesses, those around him are increasing their respect and admiration for him. He can minister to others but not to himself.

Dimmesdale struggles to punish his sin and thus alleviate his guilt, but it is only intensified by his mockery of penitence. He is continually disillusioned with the world, for he cannot see truth around him when he himself is hypocritical. He is unable to purify himself, and his destruction is closing in.

Chapter 12

This is the second scaffold scene, and it is the turning point of the story. Dimmesdale's anguish and inner conflict have reached a peak, and he becomes nearly insane. He is driven by a desire to confess and held back by a great cowardice. He is torn between guilt and fear, and for the moment fear wins out. He goes to make confession upon the scaffold; but it becomes only a mockery of confession for he cannot do so in front of his fellow men. He acknowledges his sin at midnight when all are asleep. He is confronted with several real opportunities to reveal himself, but his fear allows them to slip past.
his confession is witnessed by only two people—Hester and
Pearl. They join him on the scaffold, and for once the family is
united. They assume their true roles in life and in so doing they
form an electric chain of life. They are complete together. The
two adults are symbolically linked by Pearl, representative of
their love, their sin, and of truth. She brings Dimmesdale to a
realization of the futility of this revelation; she asks him to
stand with her at noon, which is, in essence, the course which
Dimmesdale must take to achieve salvation. However, the minister
refuses and again denies himself.

At that moment, Hawthorne again brings one's focus back to
the scarlet letter, which appears in the sky and lights the
night in an unnatural glow. It reveals the true positions of
the four main characters: Hester, Pearl and Dimmesdale stand
joined together on the scaffold, and Chillingworth, who observes
them, allows his full maliciousness to show on his face. The
light of the meteor is false, nevertheless, because its light
does not reveal this truth to the rest of the community. Hester,
too, is false at this point, for she chooses to continue her
deceptive silence about Chillingworth's true identity. Pearl
remains the truthful character in this scene; she alone demands
the appearance of Hester, Dimmesdale, and herself as a family.

Hawthorne develops the symbols of the scarlet letter, the
scaffold, and Pearl in this chapter. Pearl has become an instru-
ment of truth; she points the way to salvation for Dimmesdale.
The scaffold becomes not just a symbol of punishment, but also
a symbol of penitence. The letter serves again as a reminder of
guilt, and it is ironic that while it reveals Birmesdale in
his true state of being, it is false because the townspeople are
not present. (It might be noted that all four of the main
characters and the three minor characters which function as
symbols are present.)

Chapter 13

This chapter brings the reader to date on the character of
Hester, and one learns that the night on the scaffold is a turning
point in her life.

Hester has survived seven years of punishment in apparent
resignation and acceptance of her burden. She has gained the
respect of the community and is allowed to have some closer contact
with it. She is ready to help her fellow men in times of trouble,
and it is during these periods that she is accepted on equal terms.
In better times, however, she remains isolated for she now inspires
a kind of awe. Indeed, for many the scarlet letter stands not
for adultery, but for Able, a symbolic term of goodness.

One learns of the price which Hester has had to pay in sub-
mission. She has seemingly lost all of her warmth, her beauty,
and her womanliness. She is now harsh, severe, and drab, like
most of her Puritan peers. Pearl is the one object which keeps
some love in her heart and thus keeps her human. Hester has
turned from rebellion outwardly to radical thought, and it is in
her thoughts that one finds evidence of the passionate, defiant
spirit which is so repressed. She thinks about subjects which
are taboo in the eyes of the Puritans around her. The scarlet
letter, which was supposed to force Hester to conform to Puritan
values, has, instead, turned her away from them.
Following her meeting with Dimmesdale, Hester suddenly has a new object of attention. She is shocked by the weakness she witnessed in the minister, and she realizes that she has committed a sin in allowing Chillingworth to pursue him with no warning. She has developed to the point where she is able to stand up to Chillingworth, and she resolves to help Dimmesdale, to whom she owes the allegiance of love. This is the rebirth of her passion and her independence.

Chapter 14

This is the first private meeting of Hester with Chillingworth since their discussion in the prison, and they have come to full self-realization. Hester sees the true change in Chillingworth, who makes no attempt to hide himself from her. She realizes the full extent of his evil and deterioration; he has become a fiend, incapable of human emotion of any kind. Hester also realizes that this man's ruin is partly her fault because of her sin, and she feels deeply responsible for the destruction of both Dimmesdale and the physician. Nevertheless, she recognizes the greater responsibility toward Dimmesdale, whom she loves. Both of these characters are fully aware of the nature of Dimmesdale and of his weaknesses.

Chillingworth also recognizes the state of his own nature; he sees clearly his own progress into evil. However, his drive for revenge will not allow him to prevent further deterioration; in fact, he blames Dimmesdale for his own present state, and he gloats over his skills in causing pain.
Both Hester and Chillingworth are able to recognize the
good which was wasted in their natures. They have a mutual
understanding of their situations. The chapter ends on a note of
despair, for, in spite of their realization of basic goodness,
they also see that they are hopelessly trapped in evil, and
Chillingworth is so certain of this that he agrees to the
revelation of his true identity to Dimmesdale. He sees no hope
for the future; he denies the ability to change his destiny.

Chapter 15

In this chapter, Hester expresses her feelings about Chillingworth. She is amazed at his evil and half-expects nature to be
sympathetic with her horror and hatred. For she hates him, even
though hatred is a sin. Hester feels strongly that Chillingworth
has committed a greater crime toward her than she has toward him.
She considers her marriage to him to be her greatest sin, and she
never repents of her love for Dimmesdale or of their act.

Following her thoughts after the meeting with Chillingworth,
Hawthorne again brings into play and develops further the symbols
of the letter A and Pearl. Pearl, as always, feels a strong
connection with the letter on her mother's dress. This is expressed
even in her play, for she arranges seaweed on her own dress in the
shape of a green A. The correlation between the two symbols is
thus re-emphasized, and the green seaweed reminds one of Pearl's
close association with nature. Pearl symbolically looks for
truth and represents the truth when she asks her mother what the
letter means and why the minister holds his hand over his heart.
At this point, one sees the great loneliness which has been a part of Hester's burden of punishment. She longs to share her troubles with another, and, for one fleeting moment, she is tempted to tell all to Pearl. For the first time, too, the human characteristics of Pearl are discussed as Hester makes note of the possible traits of courage, strong will, pride, and the ability to see through falsehood which can be seen emerging in Pearl. However, Hester's old habits of silence remain with her, and for the first time in seven years she is untrue to the scarlet letter. This does not satisfy Pearl because it is false, and she continues to press her mother for information on the letter.

Chapter 16

This chapter sets the stage for the next three chapters, which take place in the forest. The forest is symbolic of the evil in Hester and Dimmesdale and the "moral wilderness in which she and other characters are lost. It is dark, silent, cold, and sombre and corresponds to the gloom in both Hester and Dimmesdale's minds. The symbol of Pearl is again associated with nature and light for she is in her element in the forest, and she alone is able to stand in the sunlight which only fitfully appears.

Pearl begs her mother for a story about the "Black Man"—the devil—who supposedly haunts the forest in search of sinners and tells Hester of the popular belief that the scarlet letter is the devil's mark. Hester admits that she has seen the Black Man—her sin—and that she bears his mark.

Another symbol is introduced and connected with Pearl in this chapter—the brook. It, like Pearl, is of unknown origin and is covered with shadow. There is an essential difference between the
two symbols, however; the brook makes a melancholy sound as if it had known great sadness; Pearl, on the other hand, has not recognized sorrow and therefore is gay and happy.

Upon the minister's approach, Pearl begins questioning Hester again with unusual truthfulness. Her questions, though avoided by Hester, are those which will lead to salvation. For example, Pearl playfully says that Dimmesdale has signed the devil's book and wonders why he does not wear a mark on the outside. She thus foreshadows Dimmesdale's final revelation and emphasizes his sin.

The minister's appearance is described, and one can see the terrible emanation which has taken place in his character. He, as Hester, travels in deep shadow.

So the stage is set for the only private conversation between Hester and Dimmesdale in the book, and it takes place in the deep gloom of the forest.

Chapter 17

This chapter records the painful, shadowy conversation between Hester and Dimmesdale. Hawthorne paints a picture of great despair and overwhelming sadness in the ghostly darkness of the forest. One sees clearly the deterioration of Dimmesdale to the point of hopelessness. Hester learns of the hollowness of Dimmesdale's esteemed position in the community, and she attempts to comfort him. The minister, however, cannot find comfort in any source.

It is at this moment that Hester becomes truthful in all respects for she reveals Chillingworth's actual identity.

Dimmesdale finally forgives her for her sinful deception, and the
essential difference between Chillingworth and the minister is pointed out. Both have committed sins; both are living lives of falsehoods, but Dimmesdale is able to forgive, to feel human compassion and pity, while Chillingworth is not.

Hester recalls their past relationship, and she expresses her belief that "what we did had a consecration of its own." She never repents of the love which she bore for Dimmesdale, and, as Dimmesdale points out, Chillingworth's sin is far greater than theirs.

They find momentary peace in the forest, for in nature they can be themselves, and they are able to reveal their inmost feelings to each other. They do not forget the outside world, though, and they seek to determine some course of action. Here one sees the great weakness of Dimmesdale's character. He can see only death as a solution; he does not have the courage and strength of will to face the world. Hester is appalled at his fear, but she struggles to help him. Dimmesdale is no longer strong enough to seek his salvation alone, and Hester resolves that he will not take action without her participation.

Chapter 13

This chapter is the one bright point of the story. Hester's decision to leave the community is made easily without regrets. She has been set apart from society for seven years, and she is no longer dependent upon it. She has transcended its laws; she no longer conforms to Puritan beliefs. Dimmesdale, however, is not only a member of the Puritan society, but is one of its leaders. As a clergyman, he is totally governed by the Puritan code, and he has only left it one tire, in the weakness of passion. He now faces
a deliberate decision between life as a hypocrite within that society and life as a known sinner outside of that society. His present life is unbearable because it is not truthful; however, though running away from his responsibility will make known his sin, the confession and acknowledgment of it will not be a public matter, and he will continue to be tormented. Finally, because of Hester's strength and his own weakness, he gives in to the temptation and thus knowingly commits a sin. The two mistakenly think that they can escape their past and change their ways.

Their decision is made easier because they are in nature in the forest where natural laws operate. They can obey natural impulses and can be open and true to their natures. This naturalness is emphasized when Hester removes the scarlet letter, symbol of man's laws, and lets down her hair. She becomes a beautiful woman again, and her warmth and light return. Nature seemingly responds, and Hawthorne shows the reader the joy of the couple in the sunlight which engulfs them.

Natural impulses also govern Pearl who spends her time in the forest. She is in her element here and blends in with the animals and the plants. As she adorns herself with flowers, she becomes truly a child of nature, and she is as wild and free as the forest around her.

Chapter 19

Pearl functions most effectively as a symbol in this chapter. She is at the same time, the sign of nature and natural laws; the symbol of the love of Hester and Dimmesdale; and the symbol of their
sin. She saves Hester from committing another sin by her (Hester's) rejection of the punishment of the scarlet letter. Pearl, as the symbol of Hester's sin, forces her to accept and acknowledge that sin. It is only when Hester replaces the letter that Pearl is able to rejoin her. Until that point she is separated, symbolically, by the rambling brook from her mother. She cannot be truly a part of the sphere of Hester and Dimmesdale without the proper context of sin and punishment.

The effect of the scarlet letter upon Hester is striking. Her natural passion and love are suppressed, and she becomes a sad, gray woman again. It is ironic that she puts the letter on again for Dimmesdale, who cannot abide Pearl's tantrum, the person for whom she removed it.

Dimmesdale can no longer be true; he cannot acknowledge his family publicly, and Pearl again points directly to the heart of the matter when she asks if he will join them in the town. Symbolically, after Dimmesdale's refusal to do so, Pearl will have nothing to do with him.

The forest again falls into gloom; the characters cannot escape their past, and their positions remain the same. Hester must continue to bear her punishment, and Dimmesdale remains a hypocrite who takes no responsibility for his sins.

Chapter 20

Hawthorne dramatically shows one of the effects which the forest interview has upon Dimmesdale. He is a completely changed man. In the forest he yielded to deliberate sin; he denied the Puritan
code which was so much a part of him, and he is running away from confession, the only way to salvation for him. He has given up trying to change his sin, and the full extent of his weakness is brought out. He discovers a sudden urge to do wicked things and is tempted to snuff several of his most respected parsoners. At the same time, he is afraid that people will say that he neglected his duties if he left before the Election Sermon.

Hawthorne uses Dimmesdale's confrontation with Mistress Hibbins to emphasize the new evil in the minister's soul. Mistress Hibbins is a symbol of the world of total evil, and she feels a kinship with Dimmesdale, and Hawthorne says that his yielding to sin is very like the compact with the devil that she would have. Dimmesdale has talked himself into believing that he cannot attain happiness by remaining as he was before the forest scene. He has changed and a result of his change is his new Election sermon. He falsely thinks himself inspired.

Chillingworth recognizes the change in Dimmesdale and also realizes that the minister recognizes the true nature of the physician. They are no longer victm and avenger, but are now companions in evil.

Chapter 21

This chapter, along with the next, provides background and the setting for the final events of the story. One learns of the historical basis for the celebration which is taking place, thus making the last events more significant.

The scene is made up of all types of people: townsfolk, frontiersmen, sailors, Indians, etc., and, they serve to give a
universality to the scene. Hawthorne thus points out that the final revelation has significance for all people, and the theme of sin which is being explored is universal.

In the midst of this scene, Hester stands attired in gray, which blends her figure into the crowd and represents her outward conformity to its laws. The scarlet letter, however, isolates her from those around her and makes her an object of attention. Pearl is dressed brightly, gaily, and her dress and continual activity express the inner excitement and emotions of her mother. Pearl again speaks of the fact that Dimmesdale associates with them in the darkness of the night and the forest, yet will not know them in the sunlight before others. Unknowingly, she hits on the central fact of Dimmesdale's situation: his fear of confession.

At the end of this chapter, Hester learns of Chillingworth's passage on the ship. He cannot allow Dimmesdale to escape his clutches; his revenge has become the central purpose of his life.

Chapter 22

Tension is built up toward the climax of the story in this chapter. Hawthorne describes the procession which is part of the celebration, at the end of which walks Dimmesdale. The change in his personality can be seen physically, for he walks with more strength and energy than ever before. He seems isolated, however, even from Hester, and this is the result of his greater sin. The evil in him is again emphasized by the appearance of Mistress Hibbins, who suggests to Hester that Dimmesdale carries the mark of the devil, soon to be revealed. Furthermore, she names Pearl
the child of the devil, which also indicates the evil found in Dimmesdale. The inner agony of Dimmesdale's soul expresses itself in the melancholic richness of his voice.

The tension is intensified by the repetition of much of that which occurred seven years before. Hester takes up a position by the scaffold; there is a magnification in the spot for her. As when she was punished, the scarlet letter causes her to be the center of attention in the market-place. She is isolated by the letter, yet those around her stare. At the same time, Dimmesdale, in the church, is holding the attention of his parishioners in a strong grin.

A final element in the developing crisis is Chillingworth's decision to come aboard the ship with Dimmesdale. When Hester learns of this, she realizes that their doom is inevitable, and that she can do nothing to save them.

Chapter 23

Dimmesdale is at the height of his career. He is praised by all and esteemed in the highest sense. The esteem is made more intense by the sadness in his voice indicating to the people his approaching death. Hawthorne ironically contrasts the glory of Dimmesdale's position with the shame of Hester's, as he builds toward the final gathering of characters on the scaffold.

In spite of this great honor, Dimmesdale is deathly pale, and his energy has drained away. Rev. Wilson and Governor Bellingham both attempt to help him, but he rejects their offers and thus symbolically rejects the help of earthly institutions.
Finally, as he walks past the scaffold, Dimmesdale recognizes publicly the kinship between Hester, Pearl, and himself. Chillingworth makes one final attempt to hold him back from the confession which will save his soul. With Hester's support, however, Dimmesdale takes his place upon the scaffold, and Chillingworth realizes that the minister has escaped his revenge.

It is significant that Dimmesdale makes his confession alone, without the help of others. He reveals his sin and the mark of it on his chest in a painful, but triumphal victory. His redemption is symbolized both by his ability to forgive Chillingworth and by the consentive kiss of Pearl. With this action, her function as a symbol is ended, and her tears indicate that she has become a person and is no longer isolated from the humans around her.

In the end, Dimmesdale has no hope for the future; he remains a Puritan soul who can only ask for God's mercy. Hester, on the other hand, hopes for some redemption; she is independent of the Puritan beliefs. Dimmesdale's final words are in praise of God for the agonies which caused him to seek the salvation of confession.

Thus, in this climaxing scaffold scene, one sees Dimmesdale and Hester triumph over sin and fear, Pearl's entry into the human race, and Chillingworth's defeat in his revenge.

Chapter 24

This chapter functions as an epilogue added for further comment by the author; the story itself is ended. Hawthorne is ambiguous in telling what was revealed on Dimmesdale's chest. Several accounts are given: (1) the letter was the result of self-imposed torture, (2) the letter was brought about by Chillingworth's
magic and drugs, (3) the letter was a sign of heaven's judgment of Dimmesdale's sin, and (4) there was nothing revealed. Hawthorne allows the reader to interpret the incident himself; the revelation was, after all, the symbolic confession of the minister's guilt. Hawthorne ends Dimmesdale's story with a call for truth.

After Dimmesdale's confession, Chillingworth's vital energy leaves him, and he dies within a year. His one purpose in life had become revenge; when this was gone, he had nothing to live for. He had become an "unhumanized mortal," and his only redemptive active is the inheritance which he leaves to Pearl.

For Pearl, Hawthorne devises a "happy ending". She becomes an heiress, and though her actual situation is unknown, Hawthorne suggests a happy marriage and children for her. She is the one optimistic part of the book and in the ending, giving the story a small hope for goodness.

Finally, Hawthorne focuses on Hester. She returns and begins a self-imposed penitence. She becomes legendary for her wisdom and her compassion for those who suffer. Even now she is not Puritan but looks for the rise of a new moral order which will replace the stern codes of Puritanism. She has found her place in society, and she gains inner wisdom from the scarlet letter.

The book, nevertheless, ends with the symbolic and dark image of Hester's tombstone engraving: "On a field, sable, the letter A, gules" (On a black background, the scarlet letter A). The overwhelming black and scarlet colors are present at the end of the book, indicating little hope of salvation from sin.
The Scarlet Letter is essentially about sin and the consequences of sin. It is a study and an exploration of the sin which is found in every man and of what possibilities can arise after sin. Hawthorne does not investigate the causes of sin; one learns of the original sin of adultery, but Hawthorne does not deal with events leading up to that sin. It is not a story of passion but rather "the history of its sequel."7

One of the basis from which Hawthorne develops his concepts of sin is the church-formulated list of the "Seven Deadly Sins." These sins were considered deadly to the soul and included pride, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony, avarice, and sloth. The first three were considered malicious in nature, while the last four were weaknesses. Pride was a sin of the intellect and the mind and was considered to be the worst of the sins. This is the type of sin in which Hawthorne was most interested.

Hawthorne discusses hidden versus acknowledged sin and passionate versus intellectual sin in the book. These types of sins can be seen in the main characters. Hester's is the acknowledged sin; hers is openly revealed to all humanity throughout the story. The sin is fully confessed and is punished accordingly. While she is punished, Hester is not tormented by guilt and the burden of the scarlet letter is thus somewhat redeeming. In Dimmesdale, on the other hand, one sees an example of hidden sin. He conceals his sin, and guilt builds up inside of him because he has remained unknown. It is only when he confesses his sin that he is able to escape his tortured thoughts.

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The sin of passion versus the sin of intellect is also 
examined. Hester and Dimmesdale commit a sin of passion--
adultery. It was a sin of weakness and was done on the spur of
the moment. They did not involve others; their sin did not hurt
those around them. It merely violated others' moral beliefs,
what may or may not be right.

Chillingworth's sin, however, is one of the intellect and of
pride, and it is Hawthorne's own variation on the intellectual
sin--the Unbardonable Sin. This type of sin may be defined as the
cold, impersonal, psychological invasion of a human personality or
soul for personal gain and knowledge. It is the subordination of
human emotion and feeling to the intellect, and the willingness to
sacrifice one's fellow man for one's own selfish interests. It
is destructive not only to the victim but to the sinner as well.
One watches Chillingworth slowly change from a human person to
a sort of fiend, who lives for knowledge and power at the expense
of Dimmesdale.

The consequences of these sins are various. Of course, one
of the most easily identifiable results of sin is guilt, and
Hawthorne shows the reader the effects of guilt in the character
of Dimmesdale. However, one of the most striking consequences of
sin is the isolation and alienation which it brings about. All
of the central characters are isolated from the rest of humanity
in one form or another. Hester is isolated physically as she
lives outside of the town, and she is isolated spiritually as
well, for she is not accepted into society. She is outcast and
rejected. Pearl, too, is isolated because of her mother's sin.
She does not play with other children, and she is looked upon as
a witch-creature, a child of the devil. Dimmesdale is isolated

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mentally because of his inner anguish and his hypocrisy. He is afraid of any close contact with others and keeps to himself. He is unable to effectively communicate with others; he cannot express his self-hatred and thus becomes even more hypocritical.

Chillingworth is perhaps the most isolated of the four, for he is completely divorced from any human feeling. Physically, he is not part of the human race; mentally and spiritually, he is a demon, without human sympathy or pity. He is never able to regain that humanity.

Mark Van Doren summarizes the themes as follows: "The broken law, the hidden guilt, cold heart that watches, and does not feel... These are the consequences of that sin which can be found, Hawthorne says, in each person."
CHARACTERS

Hawthorne develops each of his characters as an individual and as a representative of an idea. Although one does not learn of their entire backgrounds, each person is psychologically developed, and each is an example of a type of sin.

**Hester**

Hester is the strongest character in the book. She is able to survive the things which happen in her life without "buckling under." Her love and passion for Dimmesdale becomes and remains stronger than the moral code she lives within. She never repeats for she really does not feel that she has committed a sin. In many ways she is a victim of circumstances: her youth and Chillingworth's selfishness, causing her to marry a man she did not love; Chillingworth's shipwreck and capture, which allowed no news of him to reach her; and Dimmesdale's weakness in allowing the affair to develop when he knew that he could not marry her. She is able to carry the burden of her punishment even when she no longer has to. She also has the strength to help Dimmesdale to rid himself of his burden of guilt. Of all the characters, Hester alone learns from her experiences. Her attitude develops from a rather desperate recklessness to a strong, calm acceptance of her fate. She is able to help others as well as herself because of her wisdom.

Hester is a modern woman in that she rebels against the established code. She does not feel guilt, and, although she accepts her punishment, her defiance is seen in the glittering splendor of the scarlet A and in the name which she bestows on her daughter. She thinks beyond the Puritan code about society.
and the woman's place in that society. She even dares to consider suicide which was (as it still is) sacrilegious and a sin. She is independent, passionate, and heroic.

The sin which Hester commits is adultery, a sin of the passions. She is representative of the acknowledged sin; she fully admits her actions. Her sin is known and punished throughout the book, and it was not deliberate but impetuous.

Because of this sin, Hester is isolated, both physically and mentally, from the rest of the community. She lives apart from others and only associates with others when absolutely necessary. She is never able to completely fade into the society around her; she stands out both when she is scorned and when she is respected. Hester is an object of scorn, curiosity, and awe. Another consequence of her sin is the loss of her faith in humanity. She sees the sin which is in everyone, and she can no longer believe in the good of men. Instead, she learns to cope with his evil.

Truth becomes her salvation; she does not deny or resist her punishment, and it is this which saves her from the guilt which torments Dimmesdale. At only one point does she violate the principle of Truth: when she agrees to keep Chillingworth's identity a secret from Dimmesdale. This sin—and it is a sin—causes Dimmesdale much suffering, but, in turn, helps him to make his final successful effort at confession.

Dimmesdale

Dimmesdale's outstanding characteristic is his weakness. It is this weakness which causes his original downfall, and which prevents him from recovering from it. In this character, one sees
a psychological study of the tormented conscience. His struggle
to reconcile and survive his guilt dominates the book.

His original sin is that of adultery, a sin of the passions.
His greatest sin is not this one, however; it is his divergence
from and fear of the truth. He has violated the laws of his own
nature (and the law of God) which demand that he always seek and
proclaim the truth. He struggles, therefore, between his desire
to be truthful and his weak fear of exposure. The battle seems
hopeless: for, before he is finally able to confess, he becomes
more deeply involved in sin. Dimmesdale commits a deliberate sin
in choosing to leave Boston and thereby choosing to run away from
truth. It is perhaps the greatest irony of the book that while
Dimmesdale is inwardly deteriorating, his public esteem grows.
Furthermore, it is at the outset of this respect that he must
show himself guilty.

The terrible consequence of Dimmesdale's sin is the anguish
of conflict in his soul which nearly drives him mad. He is also
isolated from the community because of his fear and agony, and,
finally, he becomes an unwilling hypocrite. It is significant
that he must make his great confession alone, without support from
others.

This confession and revelation of the truth does, in the
end, redeem him, and Hawthorne's final words in reference to
him are: "Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not
your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred."
Chillingworth

The trait which Hawthorne most emphasizes in Chillingworth is his intelligence. It is pointed out over and over again that he is a "learned man," well-schooled, spending most of his time studying with books, in a never-ending search for knowledge. He has always remained somewhat aloof from mankind and the world outside of his study, and his attempt to change this isolation is the beginning of the sins which develop in the book. He committed sin by marrying Hester when he knew that she did not love him and that he would not make a good husband. He freely admits this guilt early in the story.

His greatest sin, however, is the sin which Hawthorne called the Unpardonable Sin (see Themes). Chillingworth coldly, impersonally, scientifically toys with Dimmesdale's emotions, sanity, and his very soul, for his own knowledge, revenge, and pleasure. He ignores Dimmesdale's humanity and looks upon him as "A rare case." Chillingworth also plays at being God and chooses to judge Dimmesdale himself, then act out secret, personal revenge.

In effect, therefore, he lives a lie. Outwardly, he is respected as a kindly, sympathetic, God-sent physician who watches over Dimmesdale's health. Inwardly, however, he is an evil, selfish man who uses his greatest talent--his intelligence--to hurt and destroy.

In so doing, he ironically destroys himself. He loses his humanity--his feelings, emotions, sympathy--and becomes, in his own words, a fiend. The more he torments Dimmesdale, the more he
destroys himself. He is thus isolated, both from the community and from mankind in general. Physically, he is a man. Spiritually, he is a demon, unable to feel as a human being.

There is no salvation for Chillingworth. He cannot reveal the truth about himself to the community, and, indeed, he struggles desperately to prevent Dimmesdale's confession. His life becomes dominated by the desire for revenge. When the opportunity for this is gone, he has no other reason to live, and it is too late for him to regain his lost soul.

Pearl

The character of Pearl is primarily developed as a symbol and is treated as such in the section titled Symbols. However, one also discovers in her character some very human traits.

Pearl, after all, is a child, and she is most noted for her wild freedom and independence. She is often associated with nature, indicating her free spirit. She is never bound by social law, and "She is not good or bad, because she is not responsible."10 This is so with any child. Also like any other child, Pearl is willful, capricious, and full of questions which cannot always be answered. Yet, one does not see Pearl as a human child with any certainty until her sudden outburst of grief after Dimmesdale's confession.

In spite of her moral neutrality, Pearl is isolated, as the others, by the sin which brought her into existence. She begins life outside of humanity and so she remains. She lives away from others, and she plays alone. She is very rarely shown in contact with other people until the end of the story when the reader learns of her marriage and settling down.
SYMBOLS

There is a great deal of symbolism in *The Scarlet Letter*. The three major symbols are the letter A, the scaffold, and Pearl. There are also other numerous minor symbols throughout the book.

The Letter A

This is the most complicated and forceful symbol in the book. One sees the letter A from as many angles and in as many settings as possible. Variations include the following:

(1) the red cloth letter standing for adultery which Hester wears on her dress;
(2) the gold embroidered emblem which Pearl throws flowers at;
(3) the gorgeous scarlet and gold clothing which Pearl wears to the Governor's mansion;
(4) the overpowering magnification in the mirror of armor at the Governor's mansion;
(5) the emblem which Pearl decorates with burrs in the cemetery;
(6) the great meteor light which is seen in the sky when the minister stands on the scaffold for the first time;
(7) the green sea-weed which Pearl, in play, puts on her own dress;
(8) the questionable mark on Dimmesdale's chest;
(9) the dark engraving on Hester's tombstone.

Hawthorne constantly keeps the letter before the reader's eyes; again and again it is brought to one's attention. In each of the three scaffold scenes, it is focused upon. In the first one, it
is seen on Hester's dress and Hester's sermon magnifies its awfulness. In the second scene, it appears as the great light in the sky. Finally, in the third scene, one sees it on Hester's dress and it is implied that a similar mark is on Dimmesdale's chest.

Being a symbol, the letter A has a variety of meanings. The A itself stands for several words: Adultery, Able, Angel, and perhaps even Arthur. The symbol represents different concepts to different people in the book:

(1) for the community, it is a just punishment of sin;
(2) for Hester, it is a sometimes unjust humiliation which brings a burden of suffering upon her;
(3) for Dimmesdale, it is a painful reminder of his own guilt;
(4) for Chillingworth, it is a spur for revenge;
(5) for Pearl, it is a mysterious curiosity;
(6) for the reader, it becomes all of these things, and it becomes a symbol of any sin, the sin found in each person. It also becomes a symbol of the acknowledgment of sin.

The Scaffold

The scaffold serves as a focal point for much of the important activities in The Scarlet Letter. When it appears in the plot, one is able to see changes and developments in the personalities of the central characters. It is the place where sin is punished in the Puritan community, as Hester is punished. Being in the center of the market-place, it is a constant reminder of sin and its consequences. The scaffold therefore becomes a symbol of punishment of sin.
It also, however, serves as a symbol of penitence and of open confession and acknowledgment of sin. The scaffold is the place where Dimmesdale must confess his sin in order to save his soul. He must reveal his sin before all of the community in daylight on this spot, and when he finally makes his confession, the scaffold becomes an instrument of salvation for Hester and Pearl, as well as Dimmesdale.

Pearl

Pearl functions primarily as a symbol in the book. Her symbolism is many-faceted:

1. She is the living scarlet letter;
2. She is a symbol of the union, sin, and shame of Hester and Dimmesdale;
3. Her wild and contradictory nature is symbolic of Hester's moral agony, which was greatest during her imprisonment;
4. She is a symbol of Hester's passionate emotions and her natural impulses. Pearl is constantly associated with the wild freedom of nature (particularly in the forest scene) and with freedom from social restrictions;
5. She plays an active role in Hester's punishment and, at the same time, is a major cause of her salvation. She is in essence, the living conscience of Hester, and she blocks Hester's attempt to escape her punishment in the forest;
6. She is also the living reminder of Dimmesdale's guilt, and she becomes an agent in his salvation. Her constant questions about his actions and her demands for recognition
in public point the way to truth for Dimmesdale. It is only when Dimmesdale finally confesses that Pearl is able to function truly as a human being.

(7) She is a symbol of promise and hope and is the one bright person in the book. She is able to escape sin and to live a happy, free life.

Minor symbols are numberless and serve various functions. Rev. Wilson is an esteemed member of the community, and he is a symbol of the established church. Governor Bellingham is a symbol of the state and the Puritan code. These two characters are often seen together, symbolizing the closeness of religion and law in Puritan culture. Mistress Gibbins, the Governor's sister and a professed witch, is symbolic of the world of and possibilities of evil. These three characters are all present at each of the crucial scaffold scenes.

The community of Boston is representative of the Puritan society and code in general, and another symbol of this code and its application to sin is the town beadle, who leads tether from the prison. Closely associated with the Puritan community are the prison and the cemetery. The cemetery is a symbol of death and finality, and it is with this symbol that the book ends. The book begins, however, with the prison, which is symbolic of the inevitability of sin and guilt in human nature. These two symbols along with the scaffold and the church make up a quartet of sin, death, punishment, and salvation which appears throughout the book.

The forest is also a dark symbol. It represents evil and moral confusion, for it is the place where witches and the Black Man meet, and it is in the forest that the minister yields to
greater sin. The forest is also symbolic of the natural world and natural laws which governed Hester and Dimmesdale in their love and which also govern Pearl. It therefore provides a contrast to the artificial laws of the puritan community. The brook which runs through the forest is representative of Pearl, the natural soul. It has, like Pearl, an unknown source, and it meanders through sorrow and darkness. It is also, as Dimmesdale says, a boundary between the natural world which Pearl is a part of and the dark human world to which Hester and Dimmesdale belong.

The rose-bush is symbolic of promise and life and is associated with Pearl. It too is one of the few bright objects found in the story.
The predominate images are those of color and contrasts of light and dark. Dominating colors are red, black, and grey, and others are green, gold, and yellow. The colors are associated with various values and certain characters. Black is associated with natural and moral evil, and it is therefore used to describe the prison, the cemetery, Chillingworth, and, occasionally, Pearl and Dimmescale. Red is associated with good and bad and with defiance and freedom, but particularly with sin (as it is the color of the letter), and is used primarily to describe Mester and Pearl. Grey is also a mixed color, for in it rest both black and white. It is associated with both good and evil and with conformity and acceptance. It is used in descriptions of Puritans, Mester, and sometimes, Dimmescale. Gold is associated with defiance and freedom for it is used when Hawthorne describes the letter and Pearl. Green and yellow are associated with nature, life, and natural good and are applied almost exclusively to Pearl.

Light, dark, and shadow are dominating images, which are used in a great many ways. The story itself is overwhelming a sombre darkness; it opens with the picture of the dark prison-door and closes with the dark "red and black" of the tombstone engraving. Darkness and shadow are associated primarily with evil, sin, sadness, and guilt, and they are used to describe Chillingworth, the Puritans, Mester, the forest, the cemetery, the prison, the scaffold, and especially Dimmesdale. Night, a variation on dark imagery, is connected with concealment; Dimmesdale's false admission of guilt takes place at midnight, the darkest hour.
By contrast, light is associated with exposure. The real acknowledgments of sin take place, first, in the bright morning sun, and, finally, at high noon. Sunlight is associated with truth, health, and guiltless happiness and therefore centers around the character of Pearl. She is nearly always described in terms of light.

Flower and weed imagery also abounds. Natural flowers, particularly roses, are connected with beauty, goodness, life and are associated mainly with Pearl. Unnatural flowers and unsightly weeds are connected with evil, sin, and death and are often associated with Chillingworth, the Puritans, the prison, and the cemetery.

Images of weight and rigidity are used in connection with the Puritans, the prison, and the scaffold, and, therefore, with sin and punishment.

Other images have to do with the heart and with mirrors. Heart images are mainly used with Dimmesdale and are connected with truth. Emotions which have to do with the heart, are truthful. The mirror image is used most strikingly when Auster looks at himself in the "mirror" of armor. It represents the exaggerated consciousness of sin and evil and the Puritan culture.
The structure of The Scarlet Letter is based upon the three scaffold scenes. In each of these scenes one learns of the development of the four major characters. All of the four are present at each scene, as well, as those characters which represent the church, the state, and the presence of evil; i.e., Rev. Wilson, Governor Bellingham, and Mistress Hibbins.

The first scaffold scene takes place in the bright morning sun of a summer morning. Hester is undergoing her punishment on the scaffold with the baby Pearl in her arms. At this point, she is defiant and isolated from those around her. Pearl is unidentified and acts solely as a symbol of Hester's sin and inner turmoil. Dimmesdale is seated above the scaffold with others who lead the community. He is a helpless witness to Hester's punishment who makes a weak effort to share it and is relieved when he fails. Chillingworth stands on the far edge of the crowd, a spectator unknown to the inhabitants of Boston. At this stage, he is the wronged husband, who came to Boston expecting to find a home waiting for him and is confronted with the spectacle of Hester being punished for adultery.

The second scaffold scene takes place seven years later at midnight. Dimmesdale stands on the scaffold, nearly mad. He is torn between remorse and fear, and his torment has come to a climax. Hester and Pearl stand with him. Hester has outwardly accepted her punishment and has adjusted to her situation as an outcast of society. Pearl is till a character of symbolic significance. She is an unusual phantom-like child, who is unable to fit into human society. Chillingworth is placed close to the
scaffold, looking up at the figures standing upon it. He is no longer just the wronged husband, but he has become a fiend-like avenger. His hatred, like Dimmesdale's inner torment, has come to a peak, and it is destroying his humanity.

The third and final scaffold scene takes place at noon, a few days later. All four of the main characters are on the scaffold. Dimmesdale takes the final step, and this scene for him is a triumph. He is finally able to acknowledge his sin, and, thus, though he loses his life, he saves his soul.ester supports him; she becomes a source of strength which allows Dimmesdale to make his confession a true one. At this point, Pearl gives way to tears and finally becomes a human being. Chillingworth is defeated and morally and spiritually destroyed. He no longer has a purpose in life.

Each of these scenes occurs in a moment of emotional, spiritual, and psychological tension. The changes in each character are revealed, and, at the same time, Hawthorne focuses the reader's attention on the scarlet letter. In the first scene, the crowd stares at the letter as nester stands above them, and the scene ends with Rev. Wilson's sermon revolving around the symbol and a rumor that it threw a "lurid gleam" along the prison walls. In the second scene, of course, Hawthorne presents the picture of a red A written in the sky. Finally, the third scene ends with the minister's supposed revelation of a scarlet letter on his chest. This constant reminder of the central symbol adds unity to the story.

Hawthorne also unifies his story by using a small number of characters (Bellingher, Wilson, Mistress Hibbins), each of whom.
are seen constantly throughout the book. Unity is also achieved by Hawthorne's use of one area as the setting; i.e., Boston and the region closely surrounding it.

The story takes place over a period of seven years—1642 to 1649. The first four chapters cover one day. The fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters cover a period of three years, and the eighth through twelfth chapters end after seven years have passed since Nestor's punishment. The last eleven chapters cover a space of less than a month.
The *Scarlet Letter* is usually designated a romance, for it combines reality and imagination:

The province of the romance, . . ., is the possible, the marvelous, the past, the legendary: it involves "shadow" and "mystery" and "gloomy wrong", and the development, by a "subtile process" rather than a mere didactic statement, of a moral, a "high truth". . .11

The book has a historical basis in the seventeenth century, and one finds names, places, and customs which are historical facts. However, the seventeenth century was far enough removed from the nineteenth century when Hawthorne wrote to allow his imagination full sway. In it, therefore, one sees:

. . . interplay between ideal and the real, the allegorical and the actual, past and present, light and dark, truth and illusion, fact and symbol.12

Hawthorne places his story within the context of a dramatic framework (it has been divided into five acts). Essentially, it is made up of dramatic, static scenes which show a character alone or in relationships with others, and which allow the reader to see that character, a symbol, or an idea, from various points of view. These scenes are linked together by narrative, expository chapters which serve as interludes in the dramatic action and give information and background for developments in the story.

Such ambiguity is found in the book, and Hawthorne deliberately gives possible choices concerning events to the reader. For example, he raises questions about the nature of the scarlet letter as it is seen when Hester re-enters the prison, in the sky, and particularly when it supposedly appears on Dimmesdale's chest. By using ambiguity, Hawthorne allows the reader to make his own interpretations of the story and, at the same time, leaves the way open for literal reading of the story.
POSSIBLE TEST QUESTIONS

Multiple Choice

_ 1. The story takes place in (a) Salem, (b) Philadelphia, (c) Boston, (d) an unknown town.
_ 2. The structure of the book is built around (a) a metaphor, (b) the scaffold scenes, (c) the interviews, (d) none of the above.
_ 3. Chillingworth's first sin is in (a) being a scholar, (b) carrying hester, (c) mixing poison for hester to drink, (d) revealing his identity.
_ 4. hester was never asked to sew for (a) a baby, (b) a dying man, (c) a bride, (d) the governor.
_ 5. The worst sin is committed by (a) hester, (b) Dimmesdale, (c) Pearl, (d) Chillingworth.
_ 6. The community symbolizes (a) Puritanism, (b) people in general, (c) the sadness in life, (d) the world of evil.
_ 7. hester earned her living by (a) sweeping floors, (b) needlework, (c) caring for the sick, (d) preaching sermons.
_ 8. Pearl made a letter A on her own dress from (a) her scarf, (b) a piece of her red dress, (c) a piece of thread, (d) sewed.
_ 9. hester is buried next to (a) Pearl, (b) no one, (c) Dimmesdale, (d) Chillingworth.
_ 10. The usual punishment for adultery was (a) death, (b) wearing a scarlet A, (c) a whipping, (d) stoning.

True-False

F 1. Governor Bellingham died on the night when Dimmesdale stands on the scaffold at midnight.
F 2. Hawthorne is concerned with the causes of sin.
F 3. Only hester is isolated by her sin.
T 4. The main colors that Hawthorne uses symbolically are red, black, and grey.
F 5. The Unbannishable Sin is a sin of passion and emotion.
T 6. hester was quite free to leave the town.
F 7. Dimmesdale is unable to forgive Chillingworth for the sin that he committed.
3. Dimmesdale persuaded the governor to let Hester keep Pearl.

9. The town beadle represents the severe Puritan code.

10. The letter A can be used as a symbol for any sin.

Matching

(a) Hester  (f) Pearl
(b) scaffold  (g) Bellingham
(c) Europe  (i) Chillingworth
(d) prison  (i) the letter A
(e) Dimmesdale  (j) the devil

1. The first thing Pearl saw about her mother
2. Lost his life, but saved his soul
3. Sister of Mercy
4. Prince of the Air
5. Had a deformity
6. Black flower of society
7. Hated the Puritan children
8. Represents the State
9. Represented punishment and penitence
10. Dimmesdale and Hester decided to go to _____

Quotations (Identify who said the quote.)

Chillingworth: 1. "Thou hast escaped me."

Pearl: 2. "What does this scarlet letter mean?—and why dost thou wear it on thy bosom?"

Hester: 3. "Thou shalt not go alone."

Dimmesdale: 4. "Who is that man? . . . I shiver at him!"

Hester: 5. "I felt no love, nor feigned any."

Essay

1. Pick one of the three main characters (Hester, Chillingworth, Dimmesdale) and discuss the theme of sin and its consequences as it is seen in that character.
2. Show how the scaffold is used as a unifying device in the story structure by explaining how the lives of Chillingworth, Dimmesdale, Hester, and Pearl are changed in each of the three scaffold scenes.

3. How is Pearl used as a symbol throughout the novel?
FOOTNOTES


4. Ibid., p. 139.

5. Ibid., p. 295.

6. Ibid., p. 276.


12. Ibid., p. 4.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


