WOLFNOTE SUMMARY OF...

NATHANIEL HAWTHORN’S
THE SCARLET LETTER

Context

The story circulates around a Puritan society in Massachusetts. It is June 1642.

A young woman, Hester Prynne, has been found guilty of adultery and in addition to a prison sentence she must wear a scarlet A on her dress as a sign of her sin. Each day she has to stand on the scaffold where she is exposed to public humiliation. She clutches her infant who is the product of her sin.

On this particular day, she notices a new face in the crowd. It is that of her husband who she thought had been lost at sea. He has a twisted body and will be the main character of evil in this story. He makes her swear to keep his true identity secret. He adopts the pseudonym of Roger Chillingworth.

It becomes evident at an early stage that the father of her child is the well-respected Reverend Dimmesdale. He in fact urges her to reveal her lover, as he does not have the courage to do this himself.

Eventually she is released from prison and instead of leaving the community she takes up residence in a small cottage between the town and the wilderness.

As her child, Pearl, grows, she becomes more fascinated by the scarlet A that her mother wears. She is precocious and wild when in the company of others, and is only peaceful when playing in the wilderness.

Hester learns that she may lose Pearl and so she goes to the Governor to plead her case. Reverend Dimmesdale intercedes on her behalf and she is allowed to keep the child.

Chillingworth takes up the position of physician, and ends up moving in with Dimmesdale as the Reverend’s health starts to fail. Chillingworth suspects that Dimmesdale is the Pearl’s father, and sets about a campaign of revenge on the Minister.

Dimmesdale is consumed by guilt and this is the main reason for his failing health.

There are various supernatural elements to the story. These vary from secret meetings in the woods; a symbol on the Minister’s chest – a scarlet A; to a light from meteor, which forms a giant A in the sky.

Seven years pass and Hester notices changes in both Dimmesdale and her husband, Chillingworth, who now is an emissary of evil. She decides to ask Chillingworth to release her from the oath she made about his identity and he agrees.

She meets Dimmesdale in the forest where they agree to escape to Europe to start a new life. At first Dimmesdale is inspired by this plan, but he soon loses heart when he returns to town.

Somehow, Chillingworth finds out about this plan, and he also books passage on the ship. Dimmesdale decides that he cannot leave until he declares his sin to his congregation, and he decides to do this after he has made his Election Day Sermon. This marks the climax of his clerical career and afterwards, he climbs the scaffold and with Hester and Pearl, he reveals his sign and shows the crowd the A upon his chest.

Before he dies, he asks God to forgive Chillingworth, and is reconciled with his daughter, Pearl.

Hester and Pearl leave for Europe and it is believed that Pearl marries well and has a family. Hester eventually returns to the community and when she dies, she shares a gravestone with Dimmesdale.

The Author

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804 – 1864)
He was born in Salem and was a member of one of the oldest Puritan families of New England. He was a direct descendent of William Hawthorne who was renowned for his persecution of the Quakers. William’s son John was involved in the 17th Century witch-hunts.

Nathaniel carried a heavy burden of guilt over his ancestors’ behavior and this accounts for his vigorous attacks on Puritan societies. He was a well educated, but solitary child and entered Bowdoin College, Maine in 1821. He graduated in 1825 and during these years lived in Salem and started his writing career. His first work was Fanshawe, which was published in 1828.
In 1836 he moved to Boston where he edited the American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge.

His first major work was Twice-told Tales, which sold over 1,000 copies in the first twelve months. He met and fell in love with Sophie Peabody and they married soon after. He was not able to support his family through writing alone, and therefore took the position as surveyor for the district of Salem, and his arrival in the Custom House is documented in the preface to this book. He held this post for ten years, but was dismissed on account of his political views. This marked the start of a period of hardship for the Hawthorne family, but he became an established major writer on the publication of The Scarlet Letter in 1850, and two more romances, The House of Seven Gables in 1851, and The Blithedale in 1852. He obtained the position of American Consul for Liverpool and Manchester and the family set sail for England. He returned to Massachusetts in 1860 where he continued writing until his death in 1864.

Main Characters

Hester Prynne
Hester is the main character in this novel. She is a striking woman whose husband is presumed lost at sea. She has a sinful relationship with the town’s Minister, but this remains a secret to the end of the book. However, her adultery is plain because she has a child, Pearl, and she remains an outcast from society throughout the whole book. She is condemned to wear a badge of shame in the form of a letter ‘A’ so that all will know that she is a fallen woman.

Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale
Dimmesdale is the unmarried Minister of Hester’s congregation and the father of her daughter, Pearl. He is greatly admired by his parishioners and enjoys almost saint-like status in the community. He has suppressed his sin and this leads to his deteriorating health, and his eventual downfall.

Pearl
She is the illegitimate daughter of Hester and Dimmesdale and is a constant reminder of Hester’s sin, as much a symbol as the letter ‘A’. She is a willful child and Hester has great difficulty in controlling her. She is only at peace when playing in the wilderness.

Roger Chillingworth
This is the pseudonym assumed by Hester’s husband. He is a well-educated man and becomes the symbol of evil in the story. He is consumed with revenge over the wrong he has suffered in losing his wife.

Mistress Hibbins
She is an authentic historical figure who was executed for witchcraft in 1656. She is the sister of Governor Bellingham who was elected Governor on three occasions. Mistress Hibbins is an intuitive person and recognizes the sin of both Hester and Dimmesdale.

Reverend John Wilson
This is another historical figure that is the symbol of religious authority, which with the Governor makes up the hierarchy of the Puritan society.
The Custom House

Summary
This long introductory story gives details of how Hawthorne came to write The Scarlet Letter. His interest stems from the fact that his family has a long-standing connection with the Salem district, and when Nathaniel comes to the Custom House in Salem, he uncovers artifacts that relate to the Puritans of Salem around the 1640’s. This introduction, therefore, is partly autobiographical, and we obtain an insight into the conflict Hawthorne experiences between the actions of his forefathers and his determination to tell the truth as he sees it.
Amongst the papers he discovers a faded scarlet A and parchment sheets that contain details on which the novel is based. Hawthorne embellishes the facts given in the manuscripts by weaving a romantic tale around the documented events.

Interpretation
The atmosphere of Salem in the 1800’s still has echoes of the Puritanical Salem of the 1600’s where a colony was founded, which concentrated on God's teachings and a strict duty to live by His word. Throughout the book Hawthorne provides a full description of the events, places and in particular, his ancestors who he describes as “dim and dusky, grave, bearded, sable-cloaked and steel-crowned, bitter persecutors”.
Hawthorne’s text shows his dislike and hostility towards the stern morality and rigidity of the Puritans. He is, perhaps, the ideal commentator on these events as there is Puritan blood in his veins.
We also learn about Hawthorne’s work at the Custom House. He describes it as smothering his creativity and imagination.
He is driven to write the book due to his curiosity concerning the scarlet letter. The manuscript account of the events is purely factual and Hawthorne adds the romance using his imagination viewing it as a rebellion and escape from the oppressive Puritan society. The artifact is introduced so as to give his novel an air of historic truth.

Chapter 1 – The Prison Door, and Chapter 2 – The Market Place

Summary
It is 17th Century Massachusetts and a crowd of Puritans dressed in dreary clothes gathers outside the wooden prison.
In front of the jail stands an unsightly plot of weeds in which grows a wild rose bush, which is strangely out of place amongst the drab colors.
Hester Prynne is brought out of the prison and faces the hostility of the self-righteous Puritan women. She stands in contrast to them, being proud and beautiful and she wears an elaborately embroidered scarlet letter ‘A’, which represents ‘adultery’ on her breast.
“The young woman was tall, with a figure of perfect elegance on a large scale. She had dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam.”
She holds her three-month old baby in her arms. She is unceremoniously brought to the scaffold as part of her current punishment. There she has to stand and face the insults of those around her. She passes the time by recalling her past life in Old England, trying to shut out the stern faces that look at her. However, she is forced to face her punishment and shame.

Interpretation
The reader should appreciate that there is one overshadowing character in this novel and that is the Puritan society. The members of this society provide differing facets of this character.
The main players of this novel are referred to in these chapters, being Hester; Pearl, her infant; Dimmesdale, her minister; and Chillingworth, her husband.
The reader quickly realizes the inflexibility of this Puritan society, which makes the members appear gloomy and drab.
Amongst this dreary scene, Hawthorne uses the symbol of a rose bush, which symbolizes nature and beauty, something that the Puritan society would like to crush. The symbolism is further made, by describing the rose as among the weeds or thorns, just as Hester is a symbol of beauty and freedom amongst the austere Puritans.
Hawthorne makes reference to the fact that the colony ensured that land was set aside for the cemetery and the prison, therefore showing that they realized that there would be sin that required punishment, and that they were mortal and would require a cemetery.

At an early stage, Hawthorne provides the four main players with obvious characteristics. He shows Hester as being beautiful and despite her shame, full of pride. Her daughter, Pearl, being a product of a sinful act of love, possesses a similar nature to her mother. She cries out when Hester holds her close towards the end of Chapter 2. Although Dimmesdale and Chillingworth have not as yet appeared in person, they are referred to in the action. We will learn that Dimmesdale’s parishioners feel he has taken “it very grievously to heart that such a scandal have come upon his congregation”.

Hester recalls her husband who assumes the alias of Roger Chillingworth when making her recollections of the past. He is a scholar who is deformed and she believes he is lost at sea. Throughout the novel, Hawthorne is dismissive of the Puritan society and specific examples of this appear in Chapter 2.

Hester appears like a light amongst the dark, grim members of the crowd, and the focal point of her appearance is the scarlet letter A on her dress. This is her badge of shame, which has been elaborately decorated in threads of gold. It is a reminder of the rose bush in the previous Chapter and there will be further such visual parallels later on in the book.

Again, Hawthorne is symbolic in that Hester squeezes Pearl against the letter, which signifies Pearl’s strong connection to this letter throughout the novel.

There is a certain naivety about Hawthorne’s writing and he constantly uses images and symbols to represent particular features that the characters have.

Chapter 3 – The Recognition

Summary
There is a deformed man standing in the crowd and Hester recognizes him as her husband. He enquires regarding Hester’s history and he vows that he will find out who the adulterer was, something that the rest of the community has failed to do.

The Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale pleads with Hester to name her co-conspirator. He is clearly upset saying that her partner does not appear to have the courage to step forward and confess. This is followed by harsher demands by the Reverend Mr. Wilson and other members of the crowd. “I will not speak!” answered Hester, turning pale as death, but responding to this voice, which she too surely recognized. “And my child must seek the heavenly father; she shall never know an earthly one.”

Hester is then led back to prison.

Interpretation
With the entrance of the other two principal characters, tension starts to mount in the story.

The young Dimmesdale entreats Hester to reveal the adulterer and the reader realizes that he is in fact Pearl’s father.

Further symbolism here is in the appearance of Chillingworth as a physically deformed man who possesses an evil soul. This is another theme that develops in the novel.

Hawthorne quickly shows the reader that Chillingworth is obsessed with finding out who Pearl’s father is with a view to punishing the individual.

Dimmesdale’s dialogue is full of innuendo as he is the father of the infant indicating that he is a coward, unable to reveal his sin to the congregation. He entreats Hester to name him so as to release him from his guilt and torment.

Chapter 4 – The Interview

Summary
Roger Chillingworth visits Hester in her cell. She is apprehensive about what he plans to do. Pearl is having a tantrum, and Chillingworth gives her a draft of medicine, which soon sends her fast asleep. Hester too, drinks a sedative to calm her nerves. They discuss the past and both claim responsibility for their marriage break-up, which led to Hester’s sin. He again stresses his determination to discover who Pearl’s father is, and he makes Hester take an oath to keep secret Chillingworth’s true identity.

As soon as she has made the oath, she regrets it.
Interpretation
Hawthorne brings together Hester and Chillingworth so that the reader will understand the circumstances concerning their marriage. It is important to appreciate what sort of marriage this was in comparison to Hester's relationship with Dimmesdale. This will be explored in greater depth later.

The main aim in this Chapter is to appreciate Chillingworth's attitude, and his determination to obtain satisfaction for the wrong that he has suffered. He attributes the main fault to Pearl's father, and not Hester.

Hawthorne's intention is for the reader to feel some sympathy towards Chillingworth, who is described as a lonely scholar who has been robbed of his wife. This is so that the reader will appreciate Chillingworth's change as the plot unfolds. He will make the transition from pathetic, wronged husband to the novel's main symbol of evil.

Chapter 5 – Hester at her needle

Summary
Hester has now served her term of imprisonment and is free to leave the community. To the surprise of many, she decides to remain within the district taking up residence in a small seaside cottage on the outskirts of the town. She is able to make a living through her aptitude as a seamstress, and she is in great demand except if a wedding is involved. However, nobody crosses her door as a friend, and apart from Pearl, she has no companionship. She is still the target of vicious abuse from the Puritans, which she endures with grace and dignity. She still wears the scarlet A, but this is becoming more than just a symbol of her sin. She feels that she is able to sense sin in others.

Interpretation
It should be noted that Pearl is usually dressed in scarlet – a symbol of her nature and rebelliousness. Again Hawthorne uses symbolism by placing Hester’s cottage between the town and the wilderness. To the people of the town, Hester is a living symbol of sin and they view her as an embodiment of evil in the world. They are hypocritical by availing themselves of her talent, but they treat her as an outcast. They will argue that they do this out of charity.

Hester’s isolation is summed up thus “O Fiend, whose talisman was that fatal symbol, wouldst thou leave nothing, whether in youth or age, for this poor sinner to revere?” This gives an insight into Hester’s desperation. In truth, Hester has committed the one sin of adultery, but in all other respects she now conforms to the moral strictness of the community. There are more and more references to the supernatural as the tale unfolds, and the scarlet A seems to have a power in it, and it is more than mere cloth and thread. This was referred to right at the start of the book when Hawthorne tells how he first discovered the cloth. Some of the townsfolk, when they looked inside the prison door and saw Hester being taken to her cell, swore that they could see the letter glowing in the dark.

Chapter 6 – Pearl

Summary
Pearl is a larger than life little girl of three years, and the fact that Hester sews for her elaborate dresses, only goes to enhance her spirited behavior.

Hester has great difficulty controlling her and has tried different methods to make her conform. She can be best described as a loving, mischievous imp. However, she is Hester’s constant companion. On occasions when they are out together walking and they come across village children, they will hurl abuse at Hester and Pearl, copying their parents’ actions. However, Pearl will drive them away with stones and verbal abuse, like a whirlwind.

The scarlet A on her mother's clothing strangely fascinates Pearl, and sometimes Hester is concerned that an evil spirit possesses Pearl. She constantly presses Hester to tell her where she came from.

Interpretation
In Hawthorne’s narration of the tale, he makes it plain that Pearl’s character is directly related to the sin that brought about her existence. She is, therefore, a product of an act of adultery, an act of love, which were a sin and a crime.
One must understand that to the Puritan community, extra-marital sex was behavior that stemmed from the devil, and that Pearl is a product of this unholy union. In defiance of this opinion, Hawthorne raises the interesting question – can something good come from something evil? The answer to this will not be evident until the last Chapter.

The reader may be surprised that Hester decides to stay in the district. Perhaps she wishes to be close to the one she loves. Maybe it is to show the townspeople that good can come out of evil. What Hester hopes is that her lovely child will eventually be a blessed soul in heaven.

Chapter 7 – The Governor’s Hall

Summary
A rumor is abroad that some of the main citizens of the town feel that Pearl should be taken away from Hester. On hearing this Hester sets out for Governor Bellingham’s mansion to plead her case. She needs no excuse to go to the house for she has to deliver gloves for him in any event.

Pearl has been dressed in an elaborate scarlet dress with gold thread. While they wait to see the Governor, Hester and Pearl stand before his suit of armor, and they stare at the exaggerated scarlet A as it is reflected in the polished breastplate. Hester ponders her daughter’s changed image.

Interpretation
Hawthorne uses clever imagery to heighten the tension arising before Hester’s interview with the Governor, which is symbolized by the pair staring at their strange reflections in the armor.

Will Hester be further punished, by having her only companion taken away from her? Things do not look good. We recall Pearl’s unruly behavior. Instead of being an angel of virtue she has become a pestilence intimidating the other children of the town whenever she comes into contact with them. It is curious that Hester moves so that the scarlet A appears to consume her in the reflection. Perhaps this is how she really feels and clearly she fears that she is being consumed by sin and evil.

Chapter 8 – The Elf-child and the Minister

Summary
Hester meets with the Governor, the Reverend Wilson, Dimmesdale, and Roger Chillingworth. Chillingworth is now Dimmesdale’s constant companion and personal physician. The Governor is shocked at Pearl’s immodest dress, and he asks the Reverend Wilson to test Pearl’s knowledge of the catechism. Pearl, being mischievous, feigns ignorance and responds to the question “Who made thee?” by saying that she was plucked off a rosebush that grew by the prison door.

Eventually Dimmesdale persuades the Governor that Hester should be allowed to keep Pearl whom God has given to her as a companion, but also as a reminder of her sin.

Chillingworth is not slow to observe Dimmesdale’s protection of Hester and Pearl by remarking “You speak, my friend, with a strange earnestness”.

Pearl involuntarily caresses Dimmesdale’s hand, and he kisses her on the head.

On leaving the mansion, Hester is approached by the Governor’s sister, Mistress Hibbins. She invites Hester to come at midnight to a meeting in the forest, but Hester refuses the invitation. If she had lost Pearl she would willingly have signed on with the devil.

Interpretation
It is the first time that the four main characters are together since the first scaffold scene. They represent the Government, the Puritans, the world of darkness, and the world of nature and freedom. There are subtle hints concerning the identity of Pearl’s father, but only the reader and Chillingworth are aware of this.

Hester shows her inner strength by eloquently pleading her case, which is based on the fact that she will teach her daughter what the badge of shame stands for, and this will provide Pearl with wisdom to withstand temptation.

Hawthorne emphasizes that Pearl is to be considered as a passionate product of nature symbolized by her belief that she came from a wild rose bush that grew outside the prison, the symbol of incarceration. Dimmesdale also shows signs that his health is failing due to his concealed guilt, but he is able to support Hester in her plea to keep Pearl. He describes Pearl as “child of its father’s guilt and its mother’s shame”.

We are never far away from the forces of darkness and the supernatural, and Hawthorne again brings this to the fore in the scene between Hester and Mistress Hibbins, who is later to be executed as a witch. She
says, "Wilt thou go with us tonight? There will be a merry company in the forest; and I well-nigh promised the black man that comely Hester Prynne should make one." Hawthorne wishes to emphasize that there is a strong undercurrent of evil in this society.

Chapter 9 – The Leech

Summary
Chillingworth has become a well-respected member of the community and the townspeople feel he has been sent by God to cure their ailing Minister. However, this changes when Chillingworth takes up lodgings with Dimmesdale, and he now has a demeanor of evil. Some of the gossips even suggest that he practices "the black art". Others say that God has set the two against one another as a fight between good and evil, and they are sure that their pious Minister will obtain victory over his tormentor.

Interpretation
Physicians at this time frequently used leeches as cures for all sorts of ailments, and therefore, the term leech means physician or doctor. However, Hawthorne is clearly using a double meaning here because just as a leech is used to let blood from a patient, so does Chillingworth draw the life out of Dimmesdale. In Chillingworth the townsfolk saw a heaven-sent physician. However, they could not see past this façade and when they did realize that he was evil, he already had a hold on their Minister and it was too late. Instead of taking action, they decided to leave the problem up to God.

Chapter 10 – The Leech and his Patient

Summary
Chillingworth takes on the role of advocate and he will administer justice on the head of Pearl's father. He suspects Dimmesdale as Pearl's father, and most of this Chapter deals with his endeavors to establish the truth. He gets Dimmesdale to agree that Hester is better of with her sin publicly displayed than having it concealed and eating away at her soul. This is in response to Dimmesdale's revelation that he is not sick in body, but suffers from a sickness of the soul. Chillingworth says that he will be unable to treat Dimmesdale until he confides in him. Dimmesdale responds by saying that he will not reveal his torment to "an earthly physician". While Dimmesdale sleeps deeply in a chair, Chillingworth examines Dimmesdale and pulls aside the Ministers vestment and stares in wonder at what is on his chest. Chillingworth reacts "With what a ghastly rapture, as it were, too mighty to be expressed only by the eye and features, and therefore bursting forth through the whole ugliness of his figure, and making itself even riotously manifest by the extravagant gestures with which he threw up his arms towards the ceiling, and stamped his foot upon the floor." The relevance of this passage will be made clear later on.

Interpretation
We now have an insight into the evil intentions of Chillingworth and his determination to obtain revenge on Dimmesdale. Chillingworth is fuelling the struggle, which Dimmesdale is experiencing within his soul, and he is losing this struggle. Despite this, he still cannot confess publicly his sin. There is a brief moment in this Chapter when the four main characters meet again. Chillingworth and Dimmesdale are looking out of the window when they notice Hester and Pearl in the cemetery. Pearl is showing off as usual, by dancing on one of the graves. Sensing that they are being watched, they look up to the window and Pearl says, "Come away, mother! Come away, or yonder old black man will catch you!" This young child has a clear view as to what Chillingworth represents. The reader is not clear as to what Chillingworth has seen on Dimmesdale’s chest, only that it has induced great excitement.

Chapter 11 - The Interior of a Heart

Summary
Chillingworth is now convinced that he knows Dimmesdale’s secret and now heightens his torture of the Minister. At present, Dimmesdale does not realize Chillingworth’s motives, as he still works cautiously and
subtly. Slowly Dimmesdale is coming under the evil influence of Chillingworth. His popularity with the
congregation grows and grows. They view their Minister as a champion fighting against evil. In his
sermons he makes veiled disclosures concerning his own sinful nature, but this only convinces his followers
of his holiness. He often keeps an all night vigil and beats himself with a whip.
One night he leaves his home in his clerical clothes to seek some peace.

Interpretation
Dimmesdale seems to have no will of his own and he is certainly incapable of making the confession that
would release him from his ills.
Chillingworth is convinced of the Minister’s guilt and relishes his campaign to wreak vengeance on this man
that seduced his wife and fathered Pearl.
Dimmesdale tries a pathetic public confession, but the congregation only loves him more, seeing him as
pious and good.
Hawthorne cleverly makes sure that the reader is in no doubt that the Minister is a sinner whose troubles
are largely of his own making, but he receives sympathy from the reader because Chillingworth aggravates
his suffering. However, Chillingworth’s vengeance is coming at a cost. He too now has the persona of an
emissary of the devil. He is a twisted soul encased in a twisted body, a “poor forlorn creature”.

Chapter 12 – The Minister’s Vigil

Summary
He makes his way to the scaffold where seven years earlier Hester Prynne stood holding her infant Pearl
and wearing the sign of shame. He is able to stand here while the town sleeps, safe, in stark contrast to
the scaffold that Hester stood on. Dimmesdale breaks down, and overwhelmed with guilt he cries aloud
into the night.
Just then, Hester and Pearl enter. They have been at Governor’s Winthrop’s mansion. He is near death,
and Hester has been making measurements for a robe. Pearl spots Dimmesdale and asks him if they will all
stand together on the scaffold at noon the following day.
Dimmesdale responds that they will all stand together on “the great Judgment Day”. The three stand
together on the scaffold thinking that they will be unobserved. Just then the night sky is illuminated by a
strange light and Dimmesdale thinks he can see a dull red light in the shape of a large letter A. Just then
they notice Roger Chillingworth watching them.
Dimmesdale is in fear of Chillingworth and he asks Hester whether she knows his true identity, but she
remains silent.
The next day in church, one of the officials returns Dimmesdale’s glove, which he had left on the scaffold.
“Satan dropped it there, I take it, intending a scurrilous jest against your reverence”. He also confirms that
he saw the great red letter A in the sky.

Interpretation
Half way through the novel, Hawthorne again gathers all four main characters together at the scaffold. This
is the second of three crucial scenes at this important place.
This Chapter is rich in symbolism and Hawthorne uses convincing psychology in furthering the plot.
Dimmesdale realizes that he is a coward and condemns himself for his action, or lack of action. He is close
to being totally unhinged and screams in frustration and despair.
The first scaffold scene took place in the middle of the day. This scene occurs in the dead of night.
Again, a supernatural element enters the story in the appearance of a weird light in the sky. The deranged
Dimmesdale feels he is being haunted and sees the light form into a letter A. They then realize that
Chillingworth is standing near the scaffold. He represents evil. In his narrative Hawthorne explains the light
as having been caused by a meteor and because of the misty nature of the weather, the light from the
meteor is diffused throughout the whole sky. He suggests that the A appears only in Dimmesdale’s
imagination. Hawthorne explains the sexton’s vision of the letter A as representing an angel, because
Governor Winthrop is close to death.

Chapter 13 – Another View of Hester

Summary
Hester is alarmed at Dimmesdale's appearance and the change that has taken place in him over the years. He has changed from someone that she respected into a morally weak person whose courage has all but left him. Feeling guilty, she decides that she must help this man. Over the years her own position has changed in the community. Many admire her for the way in which she carries her shame. Her scarlet A now stands for "Able", but this has come at a price, for she still has no friends, and no love or affection apart from that given to her by Pearl. She feels that she should warn Dimmesdale concerning her husband and, therefore, she resolves to meet with Chillingworth in order to solve this problem.

Interpretation
This Chapter describes how Hester's position in the Puritan community has altered. Paradoxically, she has become admired and has obtained almost mystical qualities by wearing the badge of shame. This has given her strange power. She also realizes the folly in making an oath to Chillingworth about keeping his identity secret, and she is determined to seek release from this bond.

Chapter 14 – Hester and the Physician

Summary
Hester meets with Chillingworth and is again surprised to note the change in him, seeing that he is in the grip of the devil; and she feels some guilt for contributing towards his ruin. She tells him that the oath she made is allowing him to do evil to the Minister. She remembers when he used to be kind and gentle, but now he has allowed evil to use him. Chillingworth releases Hester from her oath of silence.

Interpretation
Hester is slowly realizing that the sin she committed together with her punishment, have also contributed to the ruin of both Dimmesdale and Chillingworth. She feels that her sin has been paid for many times over and longs to be released from its burden. She cannot passively stand by and do nothing. She needs to assist her former lover. Chillingworth releases Hester from the oath, feeling that his work is nearly concluded, and it suits his plan for vengeance.

Chapter 15 – Hester and Pearl

Summary
When Chillingworth leaves Hester she realizes how evil he has become and hates him. While they were talking, Pearl played on the beach and she gathered together some seaweed and made a scarf forming a green letter A on her chest. Again Pearl asks what the scarlet letter means, and Hester is tempted to confide in her, but holds back.

Interpretation
At this stage in the novel, the reader should have a clear understanding regarding the relationships between Hester and Chillingworth, and then Dimmesdale. The first was a loveless marriage, and her final words concerning her husband are "Be it sin or no, I hate the man!"
The relationship Hester had with Dimmesdale was one of love and passion, but because it was out of wedlock, it was a dire sin in the Puritan society. Love really does not come into the equation concerning marriage. Love is akin to lust, and is regarded by the Puritans as an evil feeling. We also have an insight into Hester's quandary in that she has no one to confide in, and therefore, cannot unburden her mind.

Chapter 16 – A Forest Walk

Summary
It is known that Dimmesdale takes frequent walks along the shoreline and through the woods. Hester is determined to intercept him on one of these walks and warn him about Chillingworth.
Hester and Pearl walk along a narrow path through the dense woods and the sun flickers through the thick foliage. Pearl makes the remark that the sunshine is running away from Hester because of the A that she wears. In a gesture of total freedom and with no letter inhibiting her, Pearl runs and dances about trying to catch the patches of light. Pearl asks Hester about the black man and whether she has met him. Hester confesses that once she met the black man and that the scarlet letter she wears is his mark. Just then Dimmesdale comes upon them. He looks weak and haggard, and his face indicates that he has lost the desire to live. He holds his hand over his heart.

Interpretation
Hawthorne uses this Chapter as an introduction for the confession that will follow in Chapter 17. The chilly gloom of the forest symbolizes Hester's state of mind and mood. The reader should take time in studying this Chapter, as it is full of symbolism. The narrow footpath that the pair takes through the dense forest suggests the fine line of morality and goodness surrounded on both sides by the evil and sinful world. Hester explains that the mark she wears belongs to the black man, or the devil. It is a sign of her sin, and just then, Dimmesdale comes on the scene, being the one who has marked Hester so. The view that the forest is evil is only true in the eyes of the Puritan society. It is more accurate to regard the wood as the free, uninhibited, outside world. It is a wilderness, untamed, which the Puritans hate. They prefer order and discipline. Hawthorne spends time in this and the next Chapter, connecting Pearl with nature and the wilderness around them. When Pearl crosses the brook, she is crossing over from the Puritan world to the free, uninhibited, outside world.

Chapter 17 – The Pastor and his Parishioner

Summary
At last, Hester meets with Dimmesdale alone. He is somewhat surprised to see her here in the woods, and at first he thinks she is a ghost. In fact they are both ghosts of their former selves, and the suppression of their love for each other has had a heavy toll on them. Seeing his obvious misery, Hester tries to comfort him by pointing out that his congregation reveres him. He responds by saying that this makes him feel worse and emphasizes his hypocrisy. He has tried to reveal his hidden guilt surreptitiously to his congregation, but this only makes them honor him more. Hester now realizes the extent of the torture suffered by Dimmesdale at the hands of her husband and so she reveals the secret she has kept over the years. Dimmesdale is angry at first, but he soon calms down and Hester realizes that she still loves him, and begs his forgiveness for her silence. “With sudden and desperate tenderness she threw her arms around him, and pressed his head against her bosom; little caring though his cheek rested on the scarlet letter.” Dimmesdale regards Chillingworth as the worse type of sinner, in that he has “violated, in cold blood, the sanctity of the human heart.” For a moment, the pair share peace and harmony and they are reluctant to leave the forest and return to the stifling Puritan community. She suggests that they leave the district and perhaps return to Europe where they can be free of “these iron men and their opinions”. Dimmesdale feels he has not the strength or will, but Hester encourages him, claiming he can lead a powerful life of good elsewhere.

Interpretation
We see a great leap forward in the plot in this Chapter. Hester and Dimmesdale’s love for each other is rekindled, and the reader is given a hint that there could be a happy ending to this grim story. Just as Hester has been unable to confide to anyone regarding her feelings, so Dimmesdale has kept bottled up his guilt over these seven years. While Hester sees a future away from Salem, deep down Dimmesdale knows he cannot escape the hidden guilt that he carries, without making a full confession. Hester shows courage by revealing that she still loves Dimmesdale, knowing that in doing so, she is again violating God’s law. She hopes to encourage Dimmesdale to escape from the Puritans, who are brainwashed and cannot see life beyond their Puritanical world. She feels that they have paid for their sins, and now they can lead a full and Christian life elsewhere.
Chapter 18 – A Flood of Sunshine

Summary
The Minister starts to take on courage from Hester’s support and resolves to leave the Puritan colony. He reasons that if he is a doomed soul, then there is nothing he can do about that by remaining. Hester discards the scarlet letter and throws it into the trees. “The stigma gone, Hester heaved a long deep sigh in which the burden of shame and anguish departed from her spirit. By another impulse, she took off the formal cap that confined her hair, and down it fell upon her shoulders, dark and rich. A crimson flush was glowing on her cheek that had been long so pale. Her sex, her youth, and the whole richness of her beauty came back.”

Hester is now at one with nature and she wants Pearl to know, and she tells Dimmesdale that Pearl will love him.

While Hester and Dimmesdale have been talking, Pearl has again been playing in the woods. “A fox, startled from his sleep by her light footstep on the leaves, looked inquisitively at Pearl, as doubting whether it were better to steal off, or renew his nap on the same spot. A wolf, came up, and smelt Pearl’s robe and offered his savage head to be patted by her hand.”

Her parents now beckon Pearl, but she is reluctant to leave the world that she loves.

Interpretation
In the Summary above are two important quotes, which describe Hester’s release from the bonds of the Puritan society, and Pearl’s oneness with nature and the wilderness.

Dimmesdale decides to make his escape from the colony because he reasons that if he is doomed, then he might as well try and obtain some solace, which he cannot do under the present circumstances.

Hester reveals to Dimmesdale what is available if he takes this step, by symbolically removing the scarlet letter and letting her hair fall free without the confines of the cap. She is, in fact, transforming herself from a dull, gray, fallen woman into a passionate human being who is in love with Dimmesdale.

This whole Chapter is full of imagery and forms an oasis amongst the Gothic Chapters before and after. The description of Pearl in the woods with the animals is full of pagan imagery, totally at odds with the Puritan society. She communes with a partridge, squirrel, fox and wolf, which approach her as they regard this human child as a kindred wilderness spirit.

Hawthorne clearly intends to show that this is Pearl’s true environment. She is a gentle, elflike creature in stark contrast to the mischievous child in the streets of the town. Whether Hester and Dimmesdale’s love will meet with Pearl’s approval will be revealed next.

Chapter 19 – The Child at the Brook-side

Summary
Pearl joins with Hester and Dimmesdale and Dimmesdale confesses that he has always been afraid that someone would see his features in his daughter. Hester warns Dimmesdale not to overwhelm Pearl with emotion. Pearl notices that the scarlet letter has been discarded and that her mother’s hair is falling about her shoulders. Pearl bursts into a fit of passion and it is not clear whether she is upset at her mother’s changed appearance, or whether it is the presence of Dimmesdale.

He is distraught and begs Hester to placate the child. Hester changes her appearance back, and Pearl mockingly kisses the scarlet letter. Pearl then asks if Dimmesdale will acknowledge her in public. Dimmesdale kisses Pearl on the forehead and she immediately goes to the brook to wash the kiss off. She remains at the brook away from the adults.

Interpretation
The reader’s hope that there is to be a happy ending appears to be short-lived. Although Pearl loves the freedom of the wilderness, her mother is not to share in this adventure. The fact that her mother is constrained by her shame has given Pearl a sense of stability, a safe haven to return to after her spells of freedom. In fact, it is not the letter A that is the reminder of Hester’s sin, but Pearl herself.

Chapter 20 – The Minister in a Maze

Summary
Dimmesdale leaves the forest, and for a moment he thinks he has been dreaming, but when he looks back he sees Pearl dancing because he has gone. He turns over the plan in his mind and decides that going to Europe was the best choice. Coincidentally there is a vessel in the harbor, sailing for England soon, and Hester will secure passage for their escape.

Dimmesdale will have time to give the Election Sermon, which will enable him to terminate his career honorably. Suddenly he feels like a new man and he walks with vigor. He happens upon Mistress Hibbins who invites him to the forest where she knows he will see the black man when midnight comes. Dimmesdale hurries away and returns home. He lies to Chillingworth about what he has been doing and goes to his study to write his Election Sermon.

Interpretation

It is amazing what love can do, and this has invigorated Dimmesdale who now has a new purpose in life. The spiritual battle that he has fought melts away and he feels a new freedom from the bonds of Puritanical life.

There is an interesting conversation between Chillingworth and Dimmesdale, which is full of irony. Chillingworth remarks that Dimmesdale's congregation may find their ill Pastor gone the next year, and Dimmesdale responds, "Yea, to another world." The two mean different destinations, one being hell and the other being Europe.

Chapter 21 – The New England Holiday

Summary

The Chapter title indicates that on this day there is a procession and celebration as the elected officials assume their positions.

Hester and Pearl go to the market place to watch and Hester ponders about her new life with Dimmesdale, a life as a woman once again. She watches the procession passively, and Pearl continues to annoy her by asking precocious questions. She asks whether the Minister will acknowledge them on the scaffold. She asks whether the Minister will acknowledge them on the scaffold. Hester tries to keep her quiet. Hester then meets the Captain of the ship bound for Bristol, who advises her that they will have a companion on the voyage, Roger Chillingworth.

Interpretation

Again we witness Pearl's embarrassing behavior when in the company of other people, unlike when she is alone in the forest. There is also the unwelcome news that Chillingworth is also going back to Europe. It is clear that the couple will have difficulty in escaping the clutches of this evil man.

Chapter 22 – The Procession

Summary

Pearl and Hester watch the procession and finally the Minister comes. He has changed, showing great energy and purpose. He now seems remote to them and he does not even give them a fleeting sign of recognition. He is aloof and he has an inner spiritual strength.

Mistress Hibbins approaches Hester and Pearl and she reveals that she knows the Minister has a hidden sin comparable to Hester's scarlet token. She knows a fellow sinner when she sees one.

Pearl is also confused by what she has seen and she says to her mother, "was that the same Minister that kissed me by the brook?" Hester responds, "We must not always talk in the market place of what happens to us in the forest." Pearl runs away from her mother in her bright red dress, and she meets the ship's Captain who gives her a message for her mother that Chillingworth has secured passage for himself and Dimmesdale on the ship. When Hester hears this she feels panic and glances round at the crowd and sees the same faces that were at the first scaffold scene.

The Chapter ends with this quote "The sainted Minister in the church! The woman of the scarlet letter in the market place! Who would believe that the same scorching stigma was on them both?"

Interpretation

Hawthorne hints that Dimmesdale and Hester will not end up together, as Dimmesdale has become remote. She thinks that she must have dreamed their meeting in the forest, as Dimmesdale seems wholly unsympathetic.
The involvement of Mistress Hibbins is a foreshadowing of the unhappy end to this tale. She indicates that she is aware of Dimmesdale's sin. Remember that early on in the book we learn of clandestine meetings in the woods. She knows what goes on under the boughs of the trees and she knows who visits the woods through the expressions on their faces. The old witch goes on to reveal that the Minister's sin will soon be public knowledge.

Chapter 23 – The Revelation of the Scarlet Letter

Summary
The congregation spills out from the church at the end of Dimmesdale's Election Day Sermon. His powerful oratory inspires them - words of wisdom from a man they feel is soon to die. The sermon marks the pinnacle of Dimmesdale's career, he has saved his best sermon to the last, and it has been made in front of the whole congregation and dignitaries of the district. They pay tribute to him by saying, "Never, on New England's soil has stood a man so honored by his mortal brethren, as the preacher." There will now be a banquet at the Town Hall, and Dimmesdale suddenly staggers in the procession. He has a deathly look about him.

Several people try to help him, but he makes his way to the scaffold where Hester stands holding Pearl by the hand. He calls Hester and Pearl to his side. Chillingworth realizes what is about to happen and tries to stop him. Hester helps him get up onto the scaffold and the crowd watches in amazement. Dimmesdale tells Hester that he is dying and that he must acknowledge his sin. He bears his breast to the crowd, showing the sign of sin. He stands triumphant before the horrified crowd and then he sinks down upon the scaffold. Hester cradles him in her arms, and Chillingworth kneels down and repeats over and over, "Thou hast escaped me!"

Dimmesdale asks God's forgiveness for Chillingworth's sin, and then he turns to Pearl and asks her for a kiss. She kisses him and cries. Hester asks Dimmesdale if they will spend eternity together. He replies, "The law we broke! – the sin here so awful revealed! – let these alone be in thy thoughts.” His dying words are, "Praise be His name! His will be done! Farewell!"

Interpretation
This Chapter marks the climax of the story and it is the third scaffold scene of the book. Again, all the principal characters are present. It begins with Dimmesdale's triumphant sermon and ends with his death. His congregation feels that their Minister is a saint. He has drawn them in only for them to be shattered at his revelation on the scaffold. Just as he is false, so is their Puritan life, and their interpretation of God's word, which makes them a sect rather than a Christian community.

At the end he has shown great courage in revealing his sin, and has in fact made a greater sacrifice than Hester. He has lost his love, his child, his life and his honor. Dimmesdale knows that God sees everything and there is no escape from that fact. An escape to Europe would not put him beyond the reach of God's knowledge.

It is interesting to note that while he staggers in the procession, he refuses help from the Reverend Wilson (the church), and from the Governor (the state). He only accepts help from Hester. Despite the loss he has suffered Dimmesdale still has time to ask God's forgiveness for Chillingworth who has been his persistent tormentor. Chillingworth has lost his final victory. He no longer has Dimmesdale to torment, and to rub salt in the wound, he receives Dimmesdale's blessing.

Hester feels distraught. She would have preferred all three of them to die together, for what will she do now?

Chapter 24 – Conclusion

Summary
When Dimmesdale reveals his chest, most people say the saw a scarlet A imprinted on his flesh. Where did this come from? Hawthorne is ambiguous in this. One theory is that it was self-inflicted. Others say that it was a side effect of Chillingworth's drugs, and still others believe it was remorse gnawing its way out of Dimmesdale's conscience.

After these events, Chillingworth is consumed by his revenge and shrivels up and vanishes. He leaves Pearl great wealth in his Will and she and her mother embark for Europe. It is not clear what happened to Pearl, but it is assumed that she married well and had a family because letters are seen with seals of heraldry for Hester when she returns to Salem.
Hester has also been seen embroidering baby garments, not in Puritan colors, but of rich and lavish materials. Hester finishes her days in Salem and she becomes a symbol of comfort and compassion. She is buried in the cemetery next to the prison door.

It is curious to note that Dimmesdale and Hester share the same gravestone with the inscription "On a field, sable, the letter A, gules". (Gules is a heraldry term for red)

Interpretation

Hawthorne is ambiguous to the last, leaving many questions unanswered. He only hints at Hester and Pearl’s lives in England. He does, however, explain the moral of his story. "Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait by which the worst may be inferred.” In other words, you must be true to yourself or there is a terrible price to pay.

As far as Chillingworth is concerned, Hawthorne concludes that love and hate have a lot in common, but that love must always overcome hate.

The reader is intrigued by Pearl's apparent fate, and the happy ending is to believe that she lived a long and happy life and was the mother of many children.

Strangely, Hester chooses to come back to the Puritan society. Perhaps she is enforcing the view that God gives man the right to choose between good and evil. In a way, the Puritan life takes this choice away.

The society and its rules do the thinking for the people. The side effect of this is evident in the clandestine meetings in the woods. Ironically, therefore, the Puritan life of the seventeenth century in Salem district actually encourages private sin.

It is interesting also to note that when Hester returns she resumes wearing the scarlet A. Hawthorne suggests that the reason for doing this is to make it a sign that she has stayed true to herself by daring to live beyond the petty rules of the Puritan society.

The final irony is that Hester and Dimmesdale share a common tombstone. They could not be together in life, but in death they share the scarlet letter.
Questions for study with ideas for answers

Q: There are three pivotal scenes in the story. What are they? What significance do they have to the story? What do they have in common?

Ideas: **The 1st scaffold scene.** In Chapter 2, this sets the scene for the whole novel. It explains Hester’s humble position in the society and graphically describes the humiliation she suffers.

**The Minister’s vigil.** In Chapter 12, we return again to the scaffold, but instead of noon, it is in the dead of night, and Dimmesdale is approaching madness over the torment he suffers in hiding his adultery with Hester. The scene has supernatural overtones when light from a meteor causes a strange glow, which Dimmesdale interprets as a sign from God.

**The revelation of the scarlet letter.** In Chapter 23, the climax of the story unfolds when Dimmesdale joins with Hester and their daughter to confess his sin publicly. It has taken the Minister all these years to expose his guilt, done so admirably by Hester at the start of the story.

These Chapters set the scene for the story and are pivotal to the plot. They bring together the four main characters of the story and Hawthorne provides great tension and suspense for the reader. In particular, the second scene enables the plot to develop more quickly, and also divides the book into two clear parts. All three of these scenes take place at the scaffold, which is the focal point of the town, and also the plot.

Q: ‘The Scarlet Letter’ is full of symbolism. Expand on this and provide examples.

Ideas: Here are a few examples:-

**Chapter 1** – Outside the prison is a plot of weeds, which surround a beautiful rose bush. This symbolizes Hester, who is surrounded by the drab Puritans.

**Chapter 5** – Hester’s home lies between the town and the wilderness, which symbolizes Hester’s position in the Puritan society. She is outside the community, but she is not part of the wilderness, as she still follows the Puritan way of life.

**Chapter 6** – Pearl’s character is shown to be mischievous and rebellious. This is a symbol that her birth arose from a sinful union between Hester and Dimmesdale. Hawthorne wishes to show that her behavior is a direct result of the sinful passion that conceived her. However, his final comment is that good can come from evil, for Pearl apparently ends up leading a full and balanced life.

**Chapter 7** – Hester and Pearl observe their reflections in the Armour in the Governor’s house. As Hester moves, the scarlet A distorts and becomes larger and envelops her reflection, just as her sin covers her.

**Chapter 16** – When Hester and Pearl enter the woods, they take a narrow, winding path, which symbolizes the narrow way they take through the moral wilderness that surrounds them. The path of the Puritan is difficult when there is so much temptation in the world around. Further on, Pearl is reluctant to cross the brook and return to Hester and Dimmesdale. The brook symbolizes the dividing line between the wilderness where she is happy and the Puritan society that she naturally rebels against.

**Generally,** Hawthorne uses symbolism in conveying to the reader traits of the characters in the book. Hester’s beauty symbolizes rebellion against the drab Puritans. Chillingworth’s crooked body symbolizes his evil. Dimmesdale’s mental and physical decline symbolize the sin he suppresses.

Q: Hawthorne’s family history clearly influences his writings and his criticism of the Puritanical society of Massachusetts. Illustrate this.

Ideas: The Puritans came to New England with a determination to purify the Church of England. They gave themselves a set of rules by which to live their lives, which were in practice impossible to adhere to. This is evident by the fact that as well as building a church, they built a prison in which to house those who could not abide by their Puritanical rules. It is clear that many in the society depart from the teachings of the ‘church’ as there is evidence of satanic meetings held in secret. This came to the fore during the witch-hunts where many were executed for witchcraft. Hawthorne emphasizes this in his written work and suggests that the Puritan society acts as a catalyst for evoking the dark side of human nature. His final point of irony occurs at the end of ‘The Scarlet Letter’ when Dimmesdale’s adoring flock who regard him as almost saint-like are shocked when he reveals his sin on the scaffold after inspiring them with his best sermon. It shows that humans are fallible and will be tempted by sin, and it is folly to try and dictate to a community how they should live their lives, down to the smallest detail.
Q: Give reasons why you think Dimmesdale did not confess his sin when Hester was being punished?

Ideas: Leave aside the fact that if he had confessed early in the novel, there would be no real interest in the story. Could he have been a coward unable to reveal to his flock that he had let them down? Did he consider confessing in Chapter 1 as an easy opt-out? Did he love God more than Hester? Did he view his affair with Hester as a minor lapse, and compared to his vocation to lead his community, rather trivial, and if so leave the punishment up to God and not his parishioners? Was Dimmesdale a masochist choosing to punish himself? Had he been brainwashed by the doctrines of the Puritans, and therefore believed that he was not entitled to real happiness, and that what Hester offered was inherently evil?