

The Scarlet Letter Study Guide

Chapter 1 "The Prison Door"

1. What colony is the setting for the novel?
2. Where in the colony does the opening chapter take place?
3. For what 2 "practical necessities" did the new colony set aside land?
4. Who is Anne Hutchinson? How does Hawthorne feel about her?
5. What 2 possible symbols does the rose have for the reader?

Chapter 2 "The Market-Place"

1. Name 3 crimes and the punishments that the Puritans might witness.
2. What is the relationship between religion and law in Puritan New England?
3. Describe the Puritan women. Use one quote from the book to support your answer.
4. What punishments would the Puritan women have given Hester Prynne if it were left to them?
5. Describe the appearance of Hester Prynne.
6. What is Hester's sin? Punishment?
7. What is astonishing about the "A" on her bodice?
8. Why is Hester taken to the scaffold in the market-place?

9. What things does Hester think about while she is on the scaffold?

10. How old is her baby?

11. What detail is given to suggest the baby was born in jail?

Chapter 3 "The Recognition"

1. Describe the man who is standing on the outskirts of the crowd.

2. What prior reference was made in Chapter 2 that reminds the reader of this man?

3. What gesture does he make to Hester that suggests he knows her?

4. What does the stranger learn from the townsman next to him?

5. Who is the father of Hester's baby?

6. What is the usual punishment for adultery? Why is Hester's punishment less severe?

7. What are Hester's feelings toward the stranger?

8. Who is Bellingham? John Wilson?

9. What do Bellingham and Wilson want Hester to do?

10. Describe Dimmesdale.

11. What is his relationship to Hester? What does he ask her to reveal?

12. Why won't Hester name the child's father?

Chapter 4 "The Interview"

1. How does Hester act when she returns to prison?
2. Why does the jailer call a doctor?
3. What is the doctor's name?
4. Where did the "doctor" learn his skill?
5. Quote 2 lines that indicate the doctor and Hester know each other before this meeting.
6. What is the relationship between Chillingworth and Hester?
7. Why should Hester's marriage be a failure?
8. Did Hester ever love her husband? Quote Hester to support your answer.
9. What does Chillingworth vow to do?
10. What secret does Chillingworth ask Hester to keep?
11. What symbol is introduced for Chillingworth in Hester's final lines in this chapter?

Chapter 5: "Hester at Her Needle"

1. What "general symbol" has Hester become?
2. Give at least 2 reasons why Hester does not leave the colony.
3. Describe Hester's home.

4. What talent did Hester use to support herself and Pearl?
5. What garments is Hester not allowed to sew?
6. Why type of dress did Hester wear? Pearl?
7. What does Hester do that shows she has a charitable nature?
8. How did the poor, the ladies of Boston, the clergy, and the children treat Hester?
9. What special knowledge does Hester feel the Scarlet Letter gives her?

Chapter 6: "Pearl"

1. Why did Hester name her child "Pearl?"
2. Give at least two reasons why Hester does not leave the colony.
3. Describe Hester's home.
4. What talent did Hester use to support herself and Pearl?
5. What does the scarlet letter mean to Pearl?
6. What did the townspeople say about Pearl?

Chapter 7: "The Governor's Hall"

1. Name 2 reasons Hester visits Governor Bellingham.
2. How are the scarlet letter and Pearl alike?

Chapter 8: "The Elf and the Minister"

1. Who are the other visitors at the Governor's house?
2. How much time has elapsed since the opening scene?
3. With what creatures of fantasy is Pearl continually compared?
4. How has Chillingworth changed since Hester last saw him?
5. Why does John Wilson question Pearl?
6. How has Rev. Dimmesdale changed since Hester's public humiliation?
7. Who pleads successfully for Hester to keep her child?
8. To which visitor does Pearl respond to lovingly?

Chapter 9: "The Leech"

1. What new identity has Chillingworth assumed in Boston? Why is he successful?

2. To whom in the colony does Chillingworth attach himself as a medical advisor?
3. Describe Dimmesdale's health. .
4. What gesture has become Dimmesdale's habit?
5. Quote a sentence from this chapter that associates Chillingworth with evil.
6. What two opposing views do the townspeople hold about Roger Chillingworth?

Chapter 10: "The Leech and His Patient"

1. What "investigation" consumes Chillingworth?
2. Who is Chillingworth's main suspect and victim?
3. What is a leech? What double meaning does the word "leech" have?
4. What secret does Chillingworth believe is buried in Dimmesdale's heart?
5. Why would Dimmesdale live with guilt and not confess his sin openly?
6. What reaction does Pearl have to Chillingworth when she sees him with Rev. Dimmesdale?

7. What discovery does Chillingworth make when Dimmesdale “fell into a deep, deep slumber”?

Chapter 11: “The Interior of a Heart”

1. What effect does Reverend Dimmesdale’s guilt have upon his popularity in the colony?
2. What practices does Dimmesdale begin as a result of his guilt?

Chapter 12: “The Minister’s Vigil”

1. What is a vigil?
2. Where does Dimmesdale hold his vigil?
3. Why are Hester and Pearl out at midnight?
4. What promise does Dimmesdale refuse to make to Pearl?
5. What is miraculous about the meteor?
6. Quote a line that shows Chillingworth as a symbol of evil.

Chapter 13: “Another View of Hester”

1. How old is Pearl in this chapter?
2. How has the townspeople’s view changed toward Hester?

3. How has Hester's appearance changed?
4. What does Hester resolve to do?

Chapter 14: "Hester and the Physician"

1. How has Roger Chillingworth changed in the past 7 years?
2. Quote at least one line that directly associates Chillingworth with the devil. Cite the page number.
3. What does Hester want Chillingworth to do?
4. What revelation is she going to make to Reverend Dimmesdale?
5. What effect has Chillingworth had on Dimmesdale? Quote a line to support your answer.

Chapter 15: "Hester and Pearl"

1. Read Hester's description of Chillingworth carefully. How does she feel about him?
2. What questions does Pearl ask her mother? Why does this trouble Hester?

Chapter 16: "A Forest Walk"

1. Where does Hester plan to meet Dimmesdale? Why?

2. Describe the scene with Hester and Pearl in the sunlight. What symbolic meaning could the sunlight have? Why does sunlight shine on Pearl and not on Hester?
3. What story has Pearl heard about the "black man"?
4. What does Hester mean when she says, "Once in my life, I met the Black Man.? This scarlet letter is his mark."
5. Why does Pearl think the minister holds his hand over his heart? How is there symbolic truth in what she says?

Chapter 17: "The Pastor and His Parishioner"

1. How has Dimmesdale's secret sin affected his life? Use a quote to support your answers and cite the page number.
2. What is Dimmesdale's "secret poison his malignity, infecting all air about him?"
3. From what does Hester hope to save Dimmesdale by telling him the truth about Chillingworth?
4. Does Hester still love Dimmesdale? Use a quote to support your answer. Cite a page number.
5. What is Dimmesdale's reaction to the truth?
6. What future plans does Hester suggest to Dimmesdale as a way to escape Chillingworth?

Chapter 18: "A Flood of Sunshine"

1. What is Dimmesdale's decision in response to Hester's plea that they leave the colony? Cite a quote and page number to support your answer.

2. Why the chapter is called, "A Flood of Sunshine?"
3. What does Hester do that symbolizes putting the past behind them?
4. What is the sunshine a symbol of?
5. When Hester throws down her scarlet letter, the transfiguration foreshadowed Chapter 13 occurs, and Hester's beauty returns. What is the "magic touch" that effects the transformation?
6. Near the end of this chapter, the forest creatures are naturally drawn to Pearl and recognize her as "a kindred wildness." How do you account for this wildness in Pearl?

Chapter 19: "The Child at the Brookside"

1. What does Dimmesdale mean when he says, "Oh, Hester, what a thought is that, and how terrible to dread it! That my own features were part repeated in her face, and so strikingly that the world might see them!"
2. Why is Pearl upset when her mother calls her?
3. What is Pearl's reaction to Dimmesdale? How is Pearl a symbol for Hester and Dimmesdale?

Chapter 20: "The Minister in a Maze"

1. Where have Hester and Dimmesdale decided to go when they leave Boston? Why do they choose to go to Europe rather than remain in the New World?
2. How does it happen that Hester is acquainted with the captain of the ship now in the harbor?

3. Why does Dimmesdale consider it fortunate that the ship is not to sail for 4 days?
4. When Mistress Hibbins offers to introduce Dimmesdale to "yonder potentate you want of," to whom is she referring?

Chapters 21 "The New England Holiday," and Chapter 22 "The Procession"

1. What have the crowds of people gathered in the market-place to witness?
2. Of what ceremony in England was the Election Day pageantry a pale imitation?
3. What piece of unwelcome news does the master of the ship on which, she, Pearl, and Dimmesdale are to sail have for Hester?
4. What is particularly noticeable about Dimmesdale's manner as he walks in the procession?
5. Where does Hester stand during the procession and during Dimmesdale's sermon in the church?

Chapter 23 "The Revelation of the Scarlet Letter" and Chapter 24 "Conclusion"

1. How does Dimmesdale appear as he leaves the church after his triumphant sermon?
2. How does Pearl react when Dimmesdale calls Hester and herself to mount the scaffold with him?
3. Where, according to Chillingworth, is the one place where Dimmesdale could have successfully escaped him?
4. What were some of the conjectures made by parishioners as to the origin of the minister's scarlet letter?

5. What explanation for the events of Election Day is made by the minister's friends to make him seem blameless?

6. Dimmesdale enters the church energetically and upright to give his sermon; he leaves it stooped and tottering. How would you account for each of these quite different ways he carried himself? What might we assume has happened to him during the course of the sermon?

7. Explain why Chillingworth desperately tries to stop Dimmesdale from confessing his sins on the scaffold?

8. What do you think Dimmesdale means when he describes his and Hester's sin as violating "our reverence for each other's soul?"