



THE SCARLET LETTER BY NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

THE SCARLET LETTER READING GUIDE QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the relationship between the scarlet letter and Hester's identity. Why does she repeatedly refuse to stop wearing the letter? What is the difference between the identity she creates for herself and the identity society assigns to her?
2. In what ways could *The Scarlet Letter* be read as a commentary on the era of American history it describes? How does Hawthorne's portrayal of Europe enter into this commentary? Could the book also be seen as embodying some of the aspects it attributes to the nation in which it was written?
3. This novel makes extensive use of symbols. Discuss the difference between the Puritans' use of symbols (the meteor, for example) and the way that the narrator makes use of symbols. Do both have religious implications? Do symbols foreshadow events or simply comment on them after the fact? How do they help the characters understand their lives, and how do they help the reader understand Hawthorne's book?
4. Discuss the function of physical setting in *The Scarlet Letter*. What is the relationship between the book's events and the locations in which these events take place? Do things happen in the forest that could not happen in the town? What about time of day? Does night bring with it a set of rules that differs from those of the daytime?
5. Is *The Scarlet Letter* a protofeminist novel? Had Hester not been a woman, would she have received the same punishment? When Hester undertakes to protect other women from gender-based persecution, can we interpret her actions as pointing to a larger political statement in the text as a whole?
6. Describe Chillingworth's "revenge." Why does he choose to torture Dimmesdale and Hester when he could simply reveal that he is Hester's husband? What does this imply about justice? About evil?
7. Discuss the function of the past in this novel. The narrator tells a two-hundred-year-old story that is taken from a hundred-year-old manuscript. Why does Hawthorne use a framing story for this novel rather than simply telling the story? Why are the events set in such distant history?
8. Children play a variety of roles in this novel. Pearl is both a blessing and a curse to Hester, and she seems at times to serve as Hester's conscience. The town children, on the other hand, are cruel and brutally honest about their opinion of Hester and Pearl. Why are children presented as more perceptive and more honest than adults? How do children differ from adults in their potential for expressing these perceptions?
9. Native Americans make a few brief and mysterious appearances in this novel. What role do they play? In what ways might their presence contribute to the furthering of the book's central themes?