The Scarlet Letter

Learning Target: Determining theme and central ideas in *The Scarlet Letter*

- The novel was written in the 1850s by Nathaniel Hawthorne, a transcendentalist
- It is set in the 1640s, in the small Puritan community of Boston in Massachusetts
- Hawthorne is commenting on the influence of the Puritans more than 200 years after they first came to America; he feels America needs to “transcend” above the Puritan attitudes that dominate the country still in the 1850s (people’s anger over Margaret Fuller’s pregnancy seems to have partially inspired Hawthorne in this area)
- Another theme is hypocrisy – the Puritans don’t always do what they are supposed to do
- Another theme is guilt – and how carrying a sense of guilt can affect humans
- Another theme is revenge – and how an obsession with it can destroy a human being
- Another theme is feminism – and why women should be allowed to do more than be wives and mothers

Chapters 1, 2, and 3

- The hypocrisy of the Puritans is pointed out when they won’t throw garbage at Hester or harass her for adultery when she is on the scaffold … they don’t want the governor telling the king about it, and the governor is there
- Hypocrisy is also seen when Hester’s minister, Dimmesdale, yells at her for having a baby outside of wedlock when she is on the scaffold (he’s the dad)
- Hester’s husband, who will call himself Roger Chillingworth, shows up and pretends to be a doctor; he vows revenge on whoever made Hester pregnant
The Scarlet Letter – Chapter 4

Plot Points:

- Chillingworth and Hester have it out in jail the night before her release
- She says she never loved him and he knew it; he says he was wrong to marry her because he was so old, ugly and crippled and she was so hot
- He says he won’t harm or kill her; he wants her to stay alive so she will be known as the town adulteress… and she will have to live a life of shame

Themes:

- Revenge: Chillingworth vows revenge on baby daddy; says he will be able to figure out who he is because he knows the type of guy Hester goes for
- Feminism – Hester agrees to do as her husband says and keep his secret; she takes him calling her an adulteress, not exhibiting “feminist” behavior

Romance is going to be evident in chapter 5

Romance – a combination of emotion, and unlikely events

Chapter 5 – “Hester at her Needle”

PLOT POINTS:

- Hester miraculously finds a beach house to live in
- She starts sewing fancy clothes for ceremonies … then all the Puritans start buying fancy clothes from her in secret
- All the little kids harass her for being an adulteress when she’s out walking; the bishop yells at her for holding her head too high when she walks

THEMES:
Feminism: Hester starts her own business; she has to … she cannot live like other women

Hypocrisy: The Puritans outcast Hester, but buy fancy clothes from her; they go home and talk down of her in front of their kids

Guilt: Hester accepts her punishment and tries to live with it; she owns it; Dimmesdale does not do any of this

Chapter 6 – “Pearl”

Plot Points

- Hester names her child “Pearl” after the “pearl of great price” mentioned in the Bible … we call this a biblical allusion (when something from the Bible is referenced in literature)
- Pearl acts like a freak and taunts her mother about having to wear the scarlet letter
- Rumors go around that Pearl is a devil child; the devil is her father

Themes:

Hypocrisy: The Puritans are a bunch of gossips … nasty gossip about Pearl, Hester, the devil

Guilt: Hester struggles a bit with guilt … she wonders if God is punishing by making Pearl a complete freak … one of few times she doesn’t handle her guilt well

Chapters 7 and 8

“The Governor’s Hall” and “The Elf Child and the Minister”

PLOT POINTS:

- The governor is now more open to hearing from the Puritans because the king said he will have to face an election in the fall
Hester decides to take advantage of this and goes to see him, hoping he will convince the Puritans to let her keep Pearl.

The Puritans have decided Pearl should be taken from Hester for both of their goods … if Pearl is a devil child she is bad for Hester; Hester, in turn, is a bad influence on the devil child and would prevent her from becoming a Christian.

The bishop questions Pearl and finds her to know little about Christianity.

Baby daddy, who is on the spot, convinces the governor to allow Pearl to stay with Hester; saying God must mean for them to be together.

Governor allows it if Hester teaches the kid Christianity.

Chillingworth figures out who baby daddy is.

Governor’s sister invites Hester to go into the woods with her and hang out with the devil.

Hester says she can’t because she has a kid to take care of, but if Pearl had been taken from her, she would have.

THEMES:

**Hypocrisy**: Dimmesdale (baby daddy) makes up some BS off the top of his head to get the governor to let Pearl stay with Hester; he only does this because he is afraid if he doesn’t, Hester would reveal his secret; Also, the Puritans can’t mind their own business; spreading rumors and gossip about Hester and kid.

**Feminism**: Hester is seen as a businesswoman, delivering gloves she made for the governor’s wife.

**Revenge**: It is during this meeting at the governor’s that Chillingworth begins to figure out that Dimmesdale is the baby daddy … he notes the interaction between Hester and Dimmesdale.
Chapter 9 - “The Leech”

Plot Points:
- Chillingworth is well-liked in Boston because people think he’s a good doctor; however we know he’s really not a doctor, just a medical school professor
- Everyone begins to notice that Dimmesdale is looking really bad; his parishioners and the Bishop decides he needs 24/7 medical care
- Coincidentally, they hire Chillingworth to move in with Dimmesdale and treat him
- Chillingworth tries to get Dimmesdale to confess; when he doesn’t, he gives him bad drugs that make him more ill
- It is also revealed that Dimmesdale feels so guilty he whips himself

THEMES:

Guilt: Guilt is eating up Dimmesdale and making him crazy; the only way he can deal with it is to whip himself … he can’t support or be seen with Hester … if he’s found to be baby daddy he will be hung

Revenge: Chillingworth drugs Dimmesdale to get revenge on him … he wants to make his life miserable

Chapter 10 – “The Leech and his Patient”

Plot Points:
- More of the same with Chillingworth/Dimmesdale
- Pearl sees Chillingworth and Dimmesdale together; she says “the man in black has gotten hold of the minister” … this is significant because Pearl is identifying Chillingworth as the devil … she realizes something bad is going on, but she also thinks it’s funny

THEMES:

Continued themes of revenge and guilt from chapter 9
Chapter 11: “The Interior of a Heart”

Plot Points:

- Dimmesdale goes totally emo and starts obsessing about his guilt; begins to constantly whip himself
- Chillingworth increases the drug doses ... he really begins to enjoy watching Dimmesdale suffer
- Dimmesdale comes close to losing his mind and gets sicker and sicker

THEMES: Continues themes of revenge and guilt from chapters 9 and 10

Chapter 12 - “The Minister’s Vigil”

- One night, after whipping himself, and also under the influence of heavy drugs, Dimmesdale decides to walk out to the scaffold
- He stands on top of the scaffold as a way of punishing himself ... he figures he will pass out there and that the townspeople will find him in the morning ... and that will force him to make a confession
- After a while, Hester and Pearl walk by, on their way back from measuring the dying ex-governor for a burial robe Hester is making for him
- Dimmesdale invites Hester and Pearl to stand with him on the scaffold
- Dimmesdale tries to hold Pearl’s hand but she won’t let him ... she asks him to walk through the town tomorrow at noon holding hands with her and her mother ... he says no. This is the first indication the reader has that Pearl knows the whole story.
- Dimmesdale says they all three won’t hold hands until the end of time, when they are being judged by God
- A giant, red, letter “A” then appears in the sky ... it freaks out Dimmesdale
Chillingworth then comes by and tries to take Dimmesdale off the scaffold … Dimmesdale asks Hester who Chillingworth is and he says he hates him

Pearl says she can say who he is … and whispers some gibberish into his ear. Dimmesdale gets angry at her and Pearl just laughs … Chillingworth takes Dimmesdale home

The next day, everyone talks about the red letter “A” in the sky, and most people think God put it there at the moment the ex-governor died because there was a new “angel” in heaven

THEMES:

**Guilt:** Dimmesdale’s anxiety over his guilt has reached a new low; he basically sets himself up to be forced into making a confession so the whole thing can end

**Revenge:** Chillingworth won’t allow Dimmesdale to be forced into making a confession because that would end his revenge … Chillingworth wants to continue making Dimmesdale’s life miserable, so he removes him from the platform

**Feminism:** Hester is out walking around at midnight because she is basically on a business errand. Walking around at this time without a male escort is something no Puritan woman would ever be allowed to do. Hester gets to break the rules, and she gets paid. Is this really a punishment? She is successful and she runs her own life. Maybe the punishment has ended up being a reward.

**Chapters 13, 14, 15**

**Chapter 13: “Another View of Hester”**

Plot Points:

- It is revealed that almost everyone in Boston loves Hester because she uses the freedom she has to help people (delivering babies, caring for the sick, etc.)
Most people no longer think of the scarlet letter’s meaning as being “adultress”; they instead think of it as meaning “able.” They think this because Hester is always willing and able to help.

Themes:

- **Feminism:** Hester’s freedom to do what she wants and when she wants allows her to help people whenever she can; no man can tell her not to or make her stay in the house. Hester also refuses to take money for helping people because her business is successful and she doesn’t need the money.
- **Hypocrisy:** The Puritans continue to show their hypocrisy by supporting Hester’s business (she makes them fancy clothes that their religion does not allow them to wear)

**Chapter 14 - “Hester and the Physician”**

Plot Points:

- Hester seeks out Chillingworth and orders him to stop drugging Dimmesdale and messing with his mind. This behavior would be outlandish for any other woman, but the scarlet letter permits her to act this way because she doesn’t have to live by Puritan rules
- Chillingworth calls Dimmesdale a wimp and says the scandal has made him into a cowering mess. He says it has made Hester strong … only because she has owned it, and she has learned how to turn the scarlet letter into an advantage
- In order to get Hester to leave him alone, he plays the sympathy card: he whines that he is old, ugly, crippled, and was a virgin until Hester married him when he was in his 40s; Hester says she doesn’t care
- Chillingworth then says if she won’t leave him alone, he’ll tell everyone who the baby daddy is
- Hester than says if he does that, she’ll tell everyone that he is her husband, he is not taking care of her, and that he is impersonating a doctor
- They agree to duke it out until one of them wins
- Pearl continues to harass her mother over the scarlet letter
Themes:

**Revenge:** Chillingworth says straight out that he’s not going to quit drugging Dimmesdale and messing with his mind … he says Dimmesdale still owes him

**Feminism:** In seeking out Chillingworth and trying to order him around, Hester is acting very manly … no other woman in Boston would be able to get away with it. Chillingworth points out that Hester acts more like a man, and Dimmesdale acts more like a woman. She has been forced to deal with her guilt because she wears the scarlet letter; Dimmesdale suffers the results of hiding his guilt

**Guilt:** Hester, as Dimmesdale points out, has no guilt because she has been forced to wear the scarlet letter. What was designed as a punishment has made her strong and become an advantage. Dimmesdale, he also points out, does not have to deal with his guilt, and keeping it a secret has mentally and physically destroyed him.

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**Chapter 15 - “Hester and Pearl”**

**Plot Points:**

- Pearl drives Hester to near the breaking point when she continues to make fun of her because of the scarlet letter.
- Hester tells Pearl she wears the scarlet “letter for the same reason the minister keeps his hand over his heart.” The implication is that both Hester and Dimmesdale are guilty of the same thing: adultery.
- Hester gets so angry she threatens to lock Pearl in a closet.

**Themes:**

**Feminism:** Irony is seen in Hester being able to masterfully handle the scarlet letter, her business, etc., but not being able to handle Pearl

**Guilt:** Pearl reminds us of Dimmesdale’s inability to handle guilt
Chapters 16 and 17

Ch. 16 “A Forest Walk”

- Hester feels empowered after threatening to lock Pearl in the closet, so she decides to tell Dimmesdale the truth about Chillingworth and also tell him to start acting like a man.
- She goes to the woods to stalk him, and Pearl asks if she’s ever met “the man in black,” and if he ever left his mark on her. Pearl means the devil.
- Hester tells her yes, she met the man in black once, and the scarlet letter was the mark he left on her. Hester is referring to Dimmesdale because he, as a minister, wears black.

THEMES:

Feminism: Hester has no problem telling Dimmesdale what to do, and she intends to do it. She is stronger than he is and not afraid to let him know it. Ironically, though, she can’t stand up to her own kid. This suggests that even if women obtain equal treatment from men, they will still have problems in their lives.

Chapter 17 “The Pastor and his Parishioner”

Plot Points:

- Hester finds Dimmesdale in the woods and they have their first meeting alone together in seven years.
- She put him in a headlock and tells him to: forgive himself, start acting like a man, leave Boston, change his name, and make a new life for himself somewhere else. She also says she will leave town with him.
- Dimmesdale is ecstatic when Hester says she will go with him, and they make out.
Hester then removes the letter “A” from her dress and throws it away … she says she no longer considers what they did as “bad,” and she will no longer be known as the town adulteress

Dimmesdale and Hester then “do it”

Afterward, when they find Pearl, she sees her mother without the letter on. She freaks out because she has never seen Hester without the “A,” and without it, she has no power over her mother.

Pearl orders Hester to put the “A” back on, and Dimmesdale orders Hester to do what Pearl tells her

Hester then puts the letter back on

THEMES

Hypocrisy: Hester is a gigantic hypocrite. She constantly orders Dimmesdale and Chillingworth around and tells them how to live their lives, yet she lets her 7-year-old daughter tell her what to do … and she does it.

Feminism: Hester clearly takes on the role of the man in her relationship with Dimmesdale. She tells him what to do and how to do it. This would never happen with another Puritan couple.

Guilt: Dimmesdale finally learns how to deal with his guilt. This happens when he realizes Chillingworth’s actions (drugging, mental torture) are worse than his adultery.

Skipping over chapters 18 and 19; the events from these are included in the notes above

Chapters 20, 21, 22

Ch. 20 “The Minister in a Maze”

Plot points:

After Hester puts the “A” back on, she tells Dimmesdale of her plan for them to sail back to England in three days with her pirate friends
Dimmesdale agrees to go, and sets out on foot back to Boston. He feels happy and carefree.

Dimmesdale tells one of his annoying parishioners to get a life when he asks him a bunch of dumb questions; he also tries to make out with one of his female parishioners.

He encounters the governor’s sister; she asks him to go to the forest with her and hang with the devil … he says no.

He also tells Chillingworth he will no longer need his drugs.

THEMES:

**Hypocrisy:** Hester, who is always telling Dimmesdale what to do, continues to allow herself to be pushed around by a seven-year-old.

**Guilt:** Dimmesdale is finally enjoying a normal, guilt-free life … but he doesn’t quite know how to handle it.

**Revenge:** Chillingworth becomes angry with Dimmesdale when Dimmesdale says he no longer needs his drugs … this takes away Chillingworth’s power (which is based in revenge).

**Feminism:** Hester acting like the man in the relationship; she takes charge and tells Dimmesdale where they will go and how they will get there.

Chapter 21 “The New England Holiday”

Plot points:

- Dimmesdale is set to deliver the Election Day Sermon.
- The king is now allowing the Puritans to elect their own governor, so Election Day is a rare day of fun.
- Hester learns that Chillingworth has made plans with her pirate friends to take their ship to England.

THEMES
Feminism: It is revealed that Hester has pirate friends who have been taking her clothes to Europe and selling them; thus making her far more wealthy than we have realized. She is in business with pirates and she does not care. Again, no Puritan woman would ever be allowed to have her own business, much less one that operated in conjunction with pirates … but the scarlet letter allows her to do so because it forces her to break the rules.

Chapter 22 “The Procession”

Plot points:

- As the procession passes through Boston on the way to the church, Dimmesdale refuses to acknowledge Hester, who is standing in the crowd watching
- Hester has an epiphany … she realizes she does not love him and will not run away with him
- Dimmesdale begins his Election Day sermon

THEMES:

Feminism: Hester discovers she doesn’t need or want Dimmesdale in her life; she can live her life quite well without a man

Guilt: Despite the fact that he still thinks he is leaving on the pirate ship after the sermon, Dimmesdale can still not bring himself to announce that he’s the baby daddy

Hypocrisy: In his sermon, Dimmesdale tells his parishioners to be truthful … yet he still cannot be truthful

Revenge: Chillingworth realizes that without Dimmesdale to get revenge upon, his life will be without meaning. Therefore, he makes a plan to go with Dimmesdale to England and continue his revenge there
Chapters 23 and 24

Ch. 23 “The Revelation of the Scarlet Letter”

PLOT POINTS:

- On the scaffold, with Pearl and Hester at his side, a sickly Dimmesdale decides to rip open his shirt
- People in the crowd observe one of three things: a scarlet letter, just like Hester’s, on his chest; some red marks on his chest; nothing on his chest
- It is left up to the reader to decide what, if anything, is really on Dimmesdale’s chest
- After ripping his shirt open, Dimmesdale dies of guilt

THEMES

Guilt: Dimmesdale is finally so consumed by his guilt that it kills him … he doesn’t even have the strength to get healthy after he admits the truth

Revenge: Chillingworth realizes that he, too, will soon die … without Dimmesdale, he has no reason to live (because his revenge mission is over)

Ch. 24 “Conclusion”

PLOT POINTS:

- The narrator explains that two weeks after Dimmesdale died, Chillingworth died … because he had no reason to live
- The narrator explains that Chillingworth was an extremely wealthy member of the British upper class, the owner of much land in England and America
- It is also explained that Pearl inherits all Chillingworth’s land and money because she is his legal daughter
Pearl and Hester go to England to claim the land and money, and they live as upper class people for many years. After Pearl marries, Hester returns to Boston.

After she arrives back in Boston, Hester puts on the scarlet letter again … because it gives her the freedom to live outside the Puritans’ rules.

She spends her time counseling women who have miserable lives because of their rotten Puritan husbands … she is colonial Boston’s version of Oprah or Dr. Phil.

When Hester dies, she is buried besides Dimmesdale. The two graves share a single marker with a red letter “A” on it.

THEMES:

**Guilt:** It finally kills Dimmesdale; his death shows how lives can be destroyed by guilt.

**Revenge:** It kills Chillingworth. Without Dimmesdale, he has no reason to live, since his target of revenge is gone. This shows how revenge and the desire to “get even” can consume and destroy lives.

**Feminism:** When Hester returns to Boston after moving to England with Pearl, she resumes wearing the letter “A.” No one would care if she didn’t wear it, but wearing it gives her freedom from the rules, restrictions, and men of Puritan society. She can live her life as she sits fit, and do as she pleases. No man can tell her what to do.
**Why read The Scarlet Letter?**

1) It is a cultural touchstone – most Americans have at least some idea of what it is about and can have a conversation about it.

2) If “art” is defined as something one comes back to and even remakes, it is art. It has inspired nine movie versions, one TV mini-series, and another movie based on its plot and themes (*Easy A*). It has also inspired six operas and three plays.

3) The concept of the “scarlet letter” has become symbolic in American life … we have “scarlet letter license plates” (Ohio’s “party” plates), and people are described as having a “scarlet letter” placed upon them if they are identified as having done something wrong and are being punished for it in an open way.

**Why is The Scarlet Letter important as literature?**

1) Written in the 1840s, it uses techniques that are 100 years ahead of their time. These techniques would not be used again until the 1940s. They include:

   - **The use of Metafiction.** This is when the novel realizes it’s a novel, and the reader is addressed by the narrator or is allowed to make his or her own choices regarding outcomes. An example would be when the reader is allowed to decide if Dimmesdale really had an “A” on his chest.

   - **The use of controversial issues** to tell a story or comment upon American society. These would include sex, adultery, and feminism.

   - *The Scarlet Letter* is considered the **first American feminist novel** (a novel that champions the idea of equal rights for women). Many feminist novels were written in the 20th century and beyond, so many that “feminism” became a literary genre unto itself in America. Other feminist novels include *The Color Purple* and *The Hunger Games*.

   - *The Scarlet Letter* is one of the most important novels to be influenced by **transcendentalism**. It encourages Americans to “transcend” above their puritanical ways of thinking about sex, relationships, crime, punishment, and the place of women.