

Scarlet Letter Cheat Sheet

The Author: Nathaniel Hawthorne - born July 4, 1804 in Salem, Massachusetts. Died May 19, 1864 in Plymouth, New Hampshire. Pioneer of American literature.

Deeply connected with his Puritan ancestors. Admires their traits of perseverance, integrity, inner strength. Has issues with their rigid and oppressive rules.

Ancestor was John (hanging judge) Hathorne, one of the leading judges in the Salem witchcraft trials who never repented his actions. Nathaniel possibly added a "w" to his name to distance himself from this man.

Puritanism: Puritans left the Old World because they wanted to "purify" the Church of England. Desired to build a society, described by John Winthrop, as "a city upon a hill" — a place where the "eyes of all people are upon us."

Believed that all mankind was depraved and sinful because of Adam and Eve's fall in the Garden of Eden. The "path of righteousness" was very narrow and taught through stern sermons on guilt and sin.

Puritans were worried about being attacked, and had to cope with disease, starvation, and the harsh New England winters. The colony probably wouldn't have survived without the faith, hard work, courage, and perseverance of the early religious believers.

The rigid structure of Puritan society suppressed individualism. The rules of society were quite clear, the punishments were public and severe. The stocks were a form of public indictment and meant to deter bad behavior. Those who disagreed with the laws of the colony were banished, persecuted, and sometimes executed.

The Scarlet Letter

Year Published: 1850

Literary Style: Part of the Romanticism movement – individualism, a celebration of nature, idealization of women, themes of solitude, spiritual/supernatural elements. Considered a gothic romance, not a historical novel because many of its details are unrealistic rather than accurate.

Time Period: Mid 1640s

Location: A community in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, now present-day Boston.

Major Characters:

Hester Prynne – Had been sent to the colonies by her husband who is presumed lost at sea. Forced to wear a scarlet letter "A" because she committed adultery. Her illegitimate daughter is named Pearl. Scorned by community, dedicates herself to needlepointing. Independently minded, morally upright person. The name "Hester" is of

Greek origin that means star. It's also derived from the biblical name Esther, a beautiful heroine who saved many people from being killed.

Arthur Dimmesdale – Hester's lover and Pearl's father. He's the town's beloved minister who desperately hides his shame from the community. His tremendous guilt and inner conflict (deeply ingrained Puritan conscience) ultimately kills him. "Dim" means not bright, hopeful or good.

Roger Chillingworth - Hester's older husband from England, presumed dead. Since he's a physician by trade, the town assigns him to treat Dimmesdale when his health declines. His name "chilling" symbolizes cold hearted, cruel, frightening. He's a man of science with pure intellect and reason, lacks feelings. His goal in life is to cause physical and mental suffering to Dimmesdale. His life is meaningless without revenge and hatred; he dies about a year after Dimmesdale's death.

Pearl - Hester's (and Dimmesdale's) daughter. Symbolizes Hester's adultery and guilt, as well as her love, passion, and goodness. Not meant to be a realistic character. The name Pearl means great rarity and worth, hard, lustrous. The name Margaret is of Greek origin meaning "pearl".

Themes: Individual vs Community, Nature vs Society, Femininity vs Masculinity, Public Knowledge vs Private Actions, Guilt and Redemption

Symbolism:

Scarlet Letter "A": Adultery, able. Because Hester embroiders the "A" so finely, she takes ownership of it, thus taking control of her own punishment. The letter showcases her talent and artistry, a skill that enables her to survive as a single parent. It represents her strength and independence, setting her apart from other women. The color red is a symbol of Hester's passion and love, as well as her sins.

Forest: Freedom, nature, home of the devil, devoid of law and order. Hester and Dimmesdale meet in the woods to escape from public view. Sanctuary from the stern, repressive laws of society. People believe witches gather there and sell their souls to the devil.

Meteor: As Dimmesdale stands on the scaffold with Hester and Pearl, a meteor traces out an "A" in the night sky. Dimmesdale believes it's a sign that he should wear a mark of shame. Others in the community believe that it stands for "Angel" and marks Governor Winthrop's entry into heaven.

Ending: Hester expresses that it's "her firm belief, that, some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness." This shows optimism that future generations will move toward a less stern and repressive society where human compassion and tolerance coexist with community laws.