

The Scarlet Letter Study Questions

Chapter 1

1. What is the setting of *The Scarlet Letter*?
2. Why does Hawthorne begin the story with a reflection about the need for a cemetery and a prison?
3. What is the significance of the wild rosebush that grows beside the prison door?
4. Who was Ann Hutchinson?
5. What does Hawthorne achieve by his reference to “the sainted Ann Hutchinson?”

Chapter 2

1. On what note does this chapter begin?
2. What is Hawthorne saying about the Puritan women of the New World?
3. For what sin is Hester Payne condemned?
4. What is the Old Testament punishment for adultery?
5. What is the public view of Hester’s sin as expressed by the women outside the prison? What do their comments suggest about this society?
6. What is Hester’s punishment?
7. What is surprising about the “A” Hester has sewn for herself? What might this indicate?
8. What is accomplished by Hawthorne’s allusion to the Madonna and Child?
9. Considering the common use of physiognomy in pre-twentieth-century literature, what might Hawthorne be suggesting by portraying Hester as extremely beautiful?
10. What does the Flashback reveal about Hester’s past?

Chapter 3

1. What purpose does the conversation between the townsman and the stranger at the beginning of this chapter serve?
2. Why wasn’t Hester sentenced to death for her adultery?
3. Where has the stranger been? What motion does he make to Hester?
4. Who is Dimmsdale? What appeal does he use to convince Hester to reveal the baby’s father?
5. What is Hawthorne foreshadowing with the stranger’s prediction that the name of the father will eventually be disclosed?
6. What is ironic about Dimmesdale’s reaction to Hester’s refusal to name the father of her child?
7. Explain the allusion in the townsman’s telling Chillingworth, “that matter remaineth a riddle; and the Daniel who shall expound it is yet a-wanting.”

Chapter 4

1. Who does the stranger Hester recognized in the crowd that afternoon turn out to be?
2. Why does Hester fear Chillingworth?
3. Again, given the use of physiognomy in literature, what is Hawthorne suggesting by Chillingworth’s aged, deformed appearances?
4. Explain Chillingworth’s attitude toward Hester.
5. What does Chillingworth intend to do and why?
6. What does Chillingworth ask Hester to promise? Why does she agree?

7. What is foreshadowed by Chillingworth and Hester's exchange at the end of the chapter?

Chapter 5

1. How is Hester's emergence from the prison at the end of her confinement different from her emergence on the day she stood in public humiliation?
2. What traditional dichotomy does Hawthorne begin to establish with the location of Hester's cottage?
3. Give two reasons why Hester decides to remain instead of moving to a less-restrictive colony.
4. How do the townspeople treat Hester, and how does she react?
5. How does Hester's character evolve?
6. Describe the difference between Hester's clothing and her child's
7. What point is Hawthorne making about an individual's ability to separate oneself from one's wrongdoings?
8. Where do Hawthorne's sympathies lie? How do you know?

Chapter 6

1. What, according to the narrator, is ironic about Pearl's existence?
2. What is the significance of Pearl's name?
3. What is significant about Pearl's temperament?
4. Explain the ambiguity concerning Pearl's background.
5. Hester believes that, while society punishes her for sinning, God has a different reaction. How does Hester explain Pearl's existence?

Chapter 7

1. How sincerely concerned are the townspeople of Salem for the souls of Hester and Pearl?
2. Compare the Governor's garden with gardens in Old England. What is significant about the difference?
3. How is Pearl dressed, and what is her dress compared to?
4. Where else have we seen a rose bush in this novel?
5. What was its significance then?
6. Does it maintain the same significance here?

Chapter 8

1. Explain the puritan attitude toward luxury and how Governor Bellingham and the Reverend John Wilson responded to it.
2. How do the magistrates react to Pearl and why?
3. How does Hester behave towards the magistrates and why?
4. Why does Hester feel that Arthur Dimmsdale should speak on her behalf?
5. Why would Hawthorne have Pearl perform such an uncharacteristically tender action?
6. What does Chillingworth note about Dimmsdale's defense of Hester?
7. Describe how Dimmsdale has changed since Hester's public punishments.
8. Describe how Chillingworth has changed over the last few years.
9. What would Physiognomy suggest about Dimmsdale and Chillingworth?
10. Why would Hawthorne want to include Mistress Hibbins as a minor character in this book?

Chapter 9

1. Why doesn't Chillingworth assert his rights as Hester's husband?
2. A difference of opinions arises over the cause of Dimmsdale's failing health. Compare the townspeople's opinion to Dimmsdale's.
3. Why does Dimmsdale reject Chillingworth's offer of help? What finally persuades him to accept the offer?
4. Explain the ambiguity of the chapter's title, "The Leech."
5. The passage sets up an interesting contrast between two types of men. What is this contrast, and how is it likely to shape the future of the novel?
6. Describe Chillingworth's method for treating illness.
7. Describe the relationship between Dimmsdale and Chillingworth.
8. Some people in the community feel that God sent Chillingworth to heal their minister, but other people have a different view. Explain the second view about Chillingworth.
9. How do the people explain "the gloom and terror in the depths of the poor minister's eyes"?
10. What is suggested by the names Chillingworth and Dimmsdale?

Chapter 10

1. What is suspicious about Dimmsdale's position in his debate with Chillingworth about sin?
2. How do the black flowers initiate a discussion on hidden sins?
3. How does Dimmsdale's rationale for the confessing a hidden sin support the doctrine of salvation by works rather than salvation by faith?
4. What metaphors does Hawthorne establish for Chillingworth's probe? How do they further define Chillingworth's character?
5. What does Chillingworth mean when he mutters, "A strange sympathy betwixt soul and body"? Were it only for the art's sake, I must search this matter to the bottom!"?
6. What does Chillingworth do while Dimmsdale sleeps, and what does his action symbolize? Describe Chillingworth's reaction and what his response reveals about his character.
7. What do you suppose is the specific secret that Chillingworth discovers?

Chapter 11

1. Explain the statement, "He [Chillingworth] became, thenceforth, not a spectator only, but a chief actor, in the poor minister's interior world."
2. What is ironic about Dimmsdale's incredible success as a minister?
3. Why are Dimmsdale's public assertions of guilt ironic?
4. Explain the ways that Dimmsdale tortures himself.
5. Comparing Dimmsdale's current struggle with his sin with Hawthorne's earlier treatment of Hester and her sin, what is Hawthorne suggesting about the effects of sin?
6. What is ironic about Hawthorne's Portrayal of the Puritan society, in terms of this developing theme?

Chapter 12

1. How is the episode of Dimmsdale's midnight vigil on the scaffold structurally significant?

2. What is the significance of Pearl's challenge to Dimmsdale?
3. Considering the role of Nature in Anti-Transcendental literature, what is the significance of the meteor event?
4. Although Governor Winthrop is merely mentioned in the book, why would Hawthorne choose this night as the night Dimmsdale stands on the scaffold with Hester and Pearl?
5. How does Dimmsdale feel as he holds Pearl's hand and why?
6. Why does Pearl pull away from Dimmsdale?
7. What effect does Dimmsdale's vigil have on his career?

Chapter 13

1. What is significant about Hester's position in the community now that years have passed?
2. Compare the feelings of the general public to those of the community leaders regarding Hester Prynne. Explain why the groups view her differently.
3. What social and philosophical changes in Hawthorne describing in this chapter?
4. Explain the statement: "It is remarkable, that persons who speculate the most boldly often conform with the most perfect quietude to the external regulations of society. The thought suffices them..."
5. Compare the initial intent behind the scarlet letter to the actual effect on Hester.
6. What does Hester resolve to do and why?
7. What is Hawthorne's point comparing Hester's and Dimmsdale's reactions to their sin?
8. What image is Hawthorne evoking with Chillingworth, old, one shoulder higher than the other, digging up roots and collecting leaves, etc. in the forest?

Chapter 14

1. Notice that Chillingworth is called a "leech" in the chapters in which he interacts with Dimmsdale, but a "physician" in this interaction with Hester. Considering the definition of "leech," what do you suppose is Hawthorne's point in using these two designations?
2. What is Hester's response to the announcement that the Council had debated allowing her to remove her scarlet letter?
3. Look again at what you found out about the Anti-Transcendentalists. Why isn't forgiveness an opinion?
4. How is the doctrine of predestination reflected in this conversation between Hester and Chillingworth?
5. Why does Chillingworth believe he has a double reason for punishing Dimmsdale?
6. What does Hester ask of Chillingworth? What is his response?
7. What pleas of Hester's arouse sympathy and admiration in Chillingworth?
8. What does Hester ask of Chillingworth? What is his response?

Chapter 15

1. What is Hester coming to realize is the true sin she has committed? Why would Hawthorne consider this a worse sin than her sin with Dimmsdale?
2. What does Hester realize about her "repentance"?
3. Why does Hester hate Chillingworth?

4. Hester refuses to answer Pearl's question about the meaning of the "A." Why does Hester not confide in Pearl?
5. Why does Hawthorne portray Pearl as such a wild child?
6. How have Hester's conversations with Chillingworth and Pearl changed her attitude toward herself and her sin?

Chapter 16

1. Explain the significance of the sunlight imagery.
2. When Hester determines to warn Dimmsdale about Chillingworth, why does the meeting take place in the forest?
3. Explain the probable allusion in the line "the minister and she would need the whole wide world to breathe in."
4. What positive significance does the forest begin to take on?
5. What negative significance does the forest begin to take on?
6. In what way does Hester acknowledge her sin to Pearl?

Chapter 17

1. How is Hawthorne advancing his theme of the difference between revealed and secret sin?
2. Explain the distinction Dimmsdale makes between penance and penitence.
3. What do we learn is the emotional connection between Hester and Dimmsdale? Why is this significant to the developing theme of the book?
4. Do you believe Hester is to blame for Dimmsdale's suffering during the past seven years? Why or why not?
5. What theme about nature of sin finally begins to emerge in Hester and Dimmsdale's conversation?
6. Here is a key question for Hawthorne and the Anti-Transcendentalists: can a "polluted soul" do good for others?
7. Who are the heartless people with laws of iron to whom Hester refers?
8. This chapter ends on an optimistic note. What is the source of the optimism?

Chapter 18

1. What contrast does the narrator point out between Hester and Dimmsdale's ability to leave town?
2. Why does Dimmsdale decide to flee with Hester?
3. What is significant about the title of this chapter?
4. How does Hawthorne reinforce his idea that nature is sympathetic with the union of Hester and Dimmsdale?
5. Why would children dislike Dimmsdale?

Chapter 19

1. Beyond Hester's explanation, why won't Pearl come to Hester without the scarlet letter?
2. What is significant about the fact that Pearl will not bring her the scarlet letter, but makes her pick it up for herself?
3. Why won't Pearl show any affection to Dimmsdale? Why does she want him to walk with them hand-in-hand in the marketplace?
4. This chapter begins on the same optimistic note that ends the previous chapter. On what kind of note does the chapter end? Why?

Chapter 20

1. What would account for Dimmsdale's sudden change?
2. In terms of Hawthorne's theme contrasting hidden sin versus revealed sin, how can you explain Dimmsdale's change in this chapter?
3. Why is the chapter called "The Minister in a Maze"?

Chapter 21

1. Compare these first-generation New Englanders with their recent English ancestors and with their future New England descendants.
2. What distressing news does Hester receive from the ship captain?
3. In addition to providing more information, what other purpose does this chapter serve?

Chapter 22

1. What is Hawthorne's point about the governors' ability to govern? Does he seem to find fault with them? Why or why not?
2. What is the source of Dimmsdale's apparent new strength?
3. What does Pearl want from Dimmsdale?
4. Explain the remarks, "The sainted minister in the church! The woman of the scarlet letter in the market-place!"
5. What is Mistress Hibbins saying about the people of Salem Village?
6. What clues has Hawthorne offered his reader to prepare him or her for the revelation of the scarlet letter on his chest?

Chapter 23

1. Many critics believe the novel is structured around the three scaffold scenes: the ones in chapters 2 and 12 and this one. Explain how each fits the typical plot scheme of conflict, rising action, climax, falling action, and conclusion.
2. Why does Dimmsdale stand "on the very proudest eminence of superiority" before the crowd?
3. What does Chillingworth mean when he says, "There was no one place... where thou couldst have escaped me—save on this very scaffold!"
4. In what way is Dimmsdale's sin worse than Hester's? Of Hester, Chillingworth, and Dimmsdale, whose sin is the worst? Why?
5. What accounts for the change in Pearl?

Chapter 24

1. What theories are given about the scarlet letter imprinted in the minister's flesh?
2. Why does Hawthorne leave the origin of Dimmsdale's mark ambiguous?
3. What happens to Chillingworth? What does he give Pearl?
4. What becomes of Pearl?
5. Why do you suppose Hester returns to Salem? What might be Hawthorne's point about sin, repentance, and redemption?
6. Why would Hawthorne allow the story to end with Hester and Dimmsdale being remembered so ignominiously?