[**Scarlet Letter (Hawthorne)**](https://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/13-reading-guides/fiction/8768-scarlet-letter-hawthorne)



***Scarlet Letter***
*Nathaniel Hawthorne*, 1850
*200-300 pp. (varies by publisher)*

**Summary**
A passionate young woman, her cowardly lover, and her aging, vengeful husband are the central characters in this stark drama of the conflict between passion and convention in the harsh world of seventeenth-century Boston.

Tremendously moving and rich in psychological insight, this tragic novel of sin and redemption addresses our Puritan past. Depicting the struggle between mind and heart, Hawthorne fashioned a masterpiece of American fiction. (*From Penguin Signet Classics*.)

**Discussion Questions**
*Below are two sets of discussions questions: the first from Random House US and the second from Vintage Classics (a division of Random House UK*):

1. Hawthorne came from a long line of Puritans (one of his forefathers was a judge during the Salem witch trials), and Puritan beliefs about subjects like guilt, repression, original sin, and discipline inform the book on every level. What is your impression of how the Puritan worldview is taken up and treated by Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter*?"

2. Kathryn Harrison, in her Introduction to this volume, asserts that Hester Prynne can be seen in many ways as the first great modern heroine in American literature. Do you agree?

3. Dimmesdale is in many ways as central a character as Hester in the novel; for you as a reader, is he equally important to the story?

4. The highly charged symbolism of The Scarlet Letter is one of its most distinctive features. Discuss the central symbol of the story—the scarlet letter itself. What does it signify? How does it function in the novel? How does its meaning change over time?

5. Critics have sometimes disagreed about whether Hawthorne condones or condemns the adultery of Hester and Dimmesdale in the novel. Can either view be supported? Which do you feel is the case?

6. Describe and discuss the character of Roger Chillingworth in the novel. What does he represent in terms of the larger themes explored by the book?

7. How does Hester change over time in the novel—and how does she change in the eyes of the society around her?

8. The final scaffold scene brings the various themes, characters, and plotlines woven throughout the novel to a powerful conclusion. Describe your response to this scene, and to the disputed event that occurs near its end.
(*Questions issued by Random House US*.)

1. Critics are divided over Hawthorne’s attitude to Hester’s affair, and whether the novel ultimately condemns or condones her actions. What do you think Hawthorne’s views are? What are your own?

2. Where Hawthorne does seem to uncritically hold Hester up for our admiration is in her steadfast refusal to name Pearl’s father. Why do you think this is? Do you share his admiration for this action?

3. As noted in the biography section, Hawthorne changed his name in his early 20s, adding a W to the original Hathorne. Some critics have suggested this was to distance himself from famous Puritan ancestors, particularly one forebear who presided over the Salem Witch Trials. From your reading of the book, do you think this could be true? How does Hawthorne depict the Puritan community and their leaders?

4. The priest in the story, Dimmesdale, is a figure of hypocrisy who preaches virtue from the pulpit and refuses to take his daughter’s hand in public—but pays a terrible personal price for his actions. What points do you think Hawthorne is trying to make about organized religion? How far is Dimmesdale responsible for his own actions and how much are the townsfolk responsible for forcing him into his position?

5. The critic Kathryn Harrison has written that Hester is "the herald of the modern American heroine, a mother of such strength and stature that she towers over her progeny much as she does the citizens of Salem." Do you agree?

6. Because the novel is set before the time in which he is writing, Hawthorne deliberately uses an old-fashioned style with some archaic language. Do you find this effective or a distraction?

7. The novel contains hints, early on, that Hester is descended from an impoverished but formerly noble family in England: "She saw again her native village, in Old England, and her paternal home: a decayed house of gray stone, with a poverty-stricken aspect, but retaining a half-obliterated shield of arms over the portal, in token of antique gentility." There is a suggestion, toward the end, that Pearl may have returned to these roots by marrying into a wealthy European family, possibly nobility. What role, more generally, does class play in the novel?

8. How does Hawthorne describe the scarlet letter itself and in what different forms does it appear in the novel?

9. "Roger Chillingworth was a striking evidence of man’s faculty of transforming himself into a devil." What role does the character of Hester’s estranged husband, Roger Chillingworth play? Do you think he is morally more degenerate than Hester and her lover, or do you have sympathy for his campaign of revenge? Do you think he redeems himself at all with his bequest to Pearl at the end of the story?
(*Questions issued by Vintage Classics*.)