

## The Scarlet Letter Reading Guide

Directions: As you read each night, pay special attention to these questions/ comments. Be prepared to discuss these issues during class. You should keep notes to aid you in your reading and understanding of the novel. Focus on reading the chapters closely and using the following items to illuminate events that may be difficult to understand at first. I recognize that this is higher level reading, but I urge you to do as much as you can with the novel *independently* – push yourself. The reading becomes easier as you adapt to Hawthorne’s language and style.

### Chapter 1

- 1) Hawthorne establishes a contrast between the darkness of the Puritans and the beauty of the rose. Examine the descriptions of the Puritans, the prison, and the prison door. What does Hawthorne imply about the nature of human beings by his emphasis on the early establishment of a prison and a cemetery in this new American colony? What does the ancient wood door (in this colony only twenty years old) symbolize?
- 2) What is signified by the description of the weeds? The rose? Ann Hutchinson was a Quaker who maintained her right to her own conscience. What is Hawthorne’s attitude toward her? How does he connect her to Hester?
- 3) What effect is created by Hawthorne’s inclusion of historical references? What is the time and place of this opening scene?
- 4) What connection is there between the rose and the scarlet letter?

### Chapter 2

- 1) Compare the attitudes of the women in the market place towards Hester’s punishment. Do the men treat her too kindly with their punishment?
- 2) In what ways does Hawthorne signify that the town beadle represents male authority? What view of the Puritans does Hawthorne develop in this chapter? What motivates their strict adherence to law and their harsh punishments?
- 3) What is Hawthorne’s point when he compares Hester to the image of “Divine Maternity”? What details contribute to Hawthorne’s sympathetic presentation of Hester?
- 4) What feelings and memories does Hester experience as she stands on the scaffold?
- 5) Keep track of the people involved in the scaffold scene. There will be two more scaffold scenes in the novel. Keep track of when these scenes occur.

### Chapter 3

- 1) What person does Hester recognize? What details about him are presented through Hester’s memories in the preceding chapter?
- 2) What new information is revealed about Hester and this man who recognizes her in this chapter?
- 3) Examine the physical positions of the two ministers in relation to Hester. In what ways are they “above” her in the community? What do they command her to do?
- 4) Why does Hester refuse to name her lover?

### Chapter 4

- 1) Chillingworth is an alchemist who assumes the role of physician in the story. What is alchemy?
- 2) What positive use does Chillingworth’s medicine have in this scene? What does this act imply about his character? His relation to Pearl?
- 3) Why does Chillingworth pass over Hester’s sin and focus his revenge on her lover? Is his attitude logical? In what way is he a guilty party to Hester’s sin?

4) What promise does Chillingworth elicit from Hester?

#### Chapter 5

- 1) Why does Hester stay in the Puritan settlement? Please note that the narrator suggests more than one possibility.
- 2) Describe Hester's home, using at least two adjectives. Why do you believe Hester chooses this dwelling? What is the symbolic meaning of the location of her house?
- 3) How do the Puritan children behave around Hester's home? Why?
- 4) Hester's needlework is a very significant occupation for Hawthorne to give her. The work is specifically "women's work" and was one of the few kinds of work for economic gain women were allowed. Hawthorne, however, uses Hester's needlework symbolically. Examine the appearance of the needlework Hester does, who she sews for, and who she is not permitted to sew for. How does her needlework allow her to work her way back into the community?
- 5) Describe the contrast between Hester's clothes and Pearl's clothes. What do you suppose is the deeper meaning to the clothing choices, hinted at on page 77?
- 6) How does the scarlet letter affect Hester's day-to-day life? How does she feel each time someone looks upon the letter? Do you believe the punishment is successful?
- 7) On page 80 is the sentence, "But sometimes, once in many days, or perchance in many months, she felt an eye – a human eye – upon the ignominious brand, that seemed to give a momentary relief, as if half her agony were shared." What could this mean?
- 8) What is the proof that Hester is not completely corrupt?

#### Chapter 6

- 1) What is the symbolic meaning of Pearl's name?
- 2) Why does Hester sometimes look at her daughter with dread and fear?
- 3) Use three adjectives to describe Pearl.
- 4) How does Pearl react to the Puritan children? Why does this reaction make Hester tremble?
- 5) Why is it significant that Pearl never creates friends to play with, but only enemies?
- 6) How does Pearl react to and treat the scarlet letter?
- 7) What does Pearl do that prompts Hester's question, "Child, what art thou?" (91)?
- 8) Where does Hester say Pearl comes from? Why is Pearl's reaction significant?

#### Chapter 7

- 1) Why does Hester go to Governor Bellingham's mansion?
- 2) How is Pearl dressed for the trip to the Governor's house?
- 3) What does Hester's insistence to see the Governor – despite resistance from the bondservant – demonstrate about her character?
- 4) Hester and Pearl looking in the mirror of the armored breastplate
- 5) Repetition of words like "elf," "naughty," and "imp" to describe Pearl's character
- 6) Pearl's desire for a rose

#### Chapter 8

- 1) Who are the four men in the "custody" scene?
- 2) Hawthorne's use of light and shadow (pay attention to the placement of characters)
- 3) Reactions to Pearl's scarlet outfit
- 4) Arguments against Hester having custody of Pearl
- 5) Pearl's perversity when questioned about Christianity

- 6) How has Chillingworth's appearance changed since Hester last saw him?
- 7) Who does Hester ask to support her argument for custody?
- 8) How has Dimmesdale's appearance changed?
- 9) Dimmesdale's arguments for Hester
- 10) Pearl's interaction with Dimmesdale
- 11) Chillingworth's comments about Pearl's nature/ unknown father
- 12) Who is Mistress Hibbins? Why is her interaction with Hester significant?

#### Chapter 9

- 1) According to the narrator, who/what did Chillingworth expect to find upon his release from the natives?
- 2) Why are there so few physicians in the colonies?
- 3) Describe the "illness" of Dimmesdale
- 4) What gesture does Dimmesdale make when in pain? What may be the significance of this movement?
- 5) Why does Chillingworth initiate contact with Dimmesdale? What aspects of Dimmesdale's character does he want to examine?
- 6) Reread the paragraph on page 117 (starts with "Thus Roger Chillingworth scrutinized his patient carefully..."). Consider the significance of this paragraph and the characterization of Dimmesdale, Chillingworth, and secrecy.
- 7) Living situation of Dimmesdale and Chillingworth
- 8) Describe the townspeople's reaction to Chillingworth's changed appearance. How do they react to the continued relationship between the two men (what do they suspect)?

#### Chapter 10

- 1) What is the simile/extended metaphor used to describe Chillingworth's scrutiny of Dimmesdale?
- 2) Mention of intuition (twice) on page 123 – in paragraph beginning with "Then, after long search into the minister's dim interior..."
- 3) Symbolism of weeds on/near grave
- 4) Dimmesdale's argument for why men may hold secrets in their hearts
- 5) Pearl's inappropriate dance
- 6) Burrs on the scarlet letter and thrown at Dimmesdale
- 7) Reread the paragraph at the bottom of 127 and top of 128, which starts with "The child probably overheard their voices; for, looking up to the window..." Why/how may this paragraph be significant? What do you know about the characters at this point?
- 8) Discussion of whether Hester is better off than the father
- 9) The "fight" between Dimmesdale and Chillingworth
- 10) Chillingworth's discovery. What do you think he finds? Why do you think that? How does he react? How do you react?

#### Chapter 11

- 1) Why does Chillingworth anticipate "a more intimate revenge than any mortal had ever wreaked upon an enemy" (132)?
- 2) How does it make sense that Chillingworth is "more wretched than his victim" (134)?
- 3) Dimmesdale's sympathy with the sinful
- 4) Instances of shadow/dark and light
- 5) Dimmesdale's false confessions on the pulpit
- 6) Consider the "practices more in accordance with the old, corrupted faith of Rome" (137). What do you think Dimmesdale does to himself?

- 7) Dimmesdale's hallucinations
- 8) What keeps Dimmesdale alive? How does this contrast with Hester's purpose in life?

## Chapter 12

- 1) Where does Dimmesdale go during the night? What is the significance of this place?
- 2) Evaluate the following statement from page 141, near the end of the second paragraph of chapter 12: "Crime is for the iron-nerved, who have their choice either to endure it, or, if it press too hard, to exert their fierce and savage strength for a good purpose, and fling it off at once!" How is Dimmesdale characterized?
- 3) Reread the third paragraph of ch. 12, which starts with, "And thus, while standing on the scaffold..." Think about the imagery of this paragraph and the language Hawthorne uses. What purpose do these literary techniques serve?
- 4) Mistress Hibbins appears at the window
- 5) Passerby on the dark street coming from the death chamber of Governor Winthrop – who are the different people that are out during the night?
- 6) What is Pearl's demand of Dimmesdale, which he denies?
- 7) "A moment longer, my child!" said he" (146).
- 8) Natural occurrences in the night-sky
- 9) Dimmesdale's reaction to Chillingworth
- 10) Why is Pearl angry with Dimmesdale?
- 11) How do the townspeople react to finding Dimmesdale's glove on the scaffold? What is their interpretation of the "sign" in the sky?
- 12) Compare this scaffold scene with the earlier one in chapter 2.

## Chapter 13

- 1) The iron link between Hester and Dimmesdale
- 2) The change in general regard for Hester
  - a. How do the townspeople see Hester?
  - b. How do the townspeople see the letter?
  - c. How does Hester behave towards the townspeople?
- 3) "There glimmered the embroidered letter, with comfort in its unearthly ray. Elsewhere the token of sin, it was the taper of the sick chamber."
- 4) "It is our Hester – the town's own Hester – who is so kind to the poor, so helpful to the sick, so comforting to the afflicted!"
- 5) How has Hester's appearance changed over the years? What do these outward appearances reflect about her inner turmoil?

- 6) "The world's law was no law for her mind." What is the meaning of "a freedom of speculation"? How has a life of solitude changed Hester's intellectual/ spiritual being?
- 7) Pearl's affect on Hester's life
- 8) Hester's questions about the nature of existence
- 9) "The scarlet letter had not done its office."
- 10) Hester's guilt concerning Dimmesdale
- 11) Reversal of sin between Hester and Chillingworth

#### Chapter 14

- 1) Pay attention to the connections made between Pearl and nature
- 2) Hester's belief about still wearing the scarlet letter and how it "would fall away of its own nature" if she were worthy
- 3) Physical description of Chillingworth using "blackness," "fire," "devil," and so forth
- 4) Hester's responsibility/role in Chillingworth's ruin
- 5) "Your clutch is on his life, and you cause him to die daily a living death; and still he knows you not. In permitting this, I have surely acted a false part by the only man to whom the power was left me to be true!"
- 6) "For, Hester, his spirit lacked the strength that could have borne up, as thine has, beneath a burden like thy scarlet letter."
- 7) Chillingworth's self-proclamation of being a fiend
- 8) Hester and Chillingworth's reasons for pitying one another
- 9) "Let the black flower blossom as it may. Now go thy ways, and deal as thou wilt with yonder man."
- 10) Hester's decision about telling Dimmesdale the truth about Chillingworth

#### Chapter 15

- 1) What does Hester imagine she may see beneath/behind the footsteps of Chillingworth? Why is this significant?
- 2) "Be it sin or no... I hate the man!... He betrayed me! He has done me worse wrong than I did him!"
- 3) Pearl's adventure with the pool of water and her reflection
- 4) Pearl throws stones at birds and then feels remorse
- 5) Pearl's seaweed letter
- 6) Hester's conversation with Pearl about the letter
- 7) Pearl's mature (or childish/innocent?) insights into the nature of her mother and Dimmesdale
- 8) Hester betrays her letter
- 9) Pearl's incessant questions about Hester and Dimmesdale

#### Chapter 16

- 1) "Hester never thought of meeting him in any narrower privacy than beneath the open sky."
- 2) Walking away from town and into the forest

- 3) Hawthorne's vivid description of the forest scenery
- 4) Pearl's comment about sunshine
- 5) When Hester tells Pearl to catch the sunlight, what moment from earlier in the book is recalled? Look back and find the corresponding passage. Consider the significance of these moments.
- 6) What story does Pearl want to hear?
- 7) Black Man's mark on Hester
- 8) "Pearl resembled the brook, inasmuch as the current of her life gushed from a wellspring..."
- 9) Pearl's questions about Dimmesdale's hand over his heart
- 10) As this chapter ends, consider your thoughts about what has happened so far. What do you believe will happen next?

### Chapter 17

- 1) woman or shadow
- 2) initial awkwardness of the meeting between the two
- 3) the roles of each in the conversation – how would you characterize them? How are they the same? Different?
- 4) "still so passionately loved" – how do you react to seeing the two characters together?
- 5) Dimmesdale's reaction to the truth about Chillingworth – is he justified in his anger?
- 6) Chillingworth's sin worse than their sin
- 7) "What we did had a consecration of its own" – what could Hester mean by this?
- 8) "Think for me, Hester! Thou art strong. Resolve for me!"
- 9) "Thou shalt not go alone!" – what has been decided? Why is this "all was spoken!"?

### Chapter 18

- 1) Why is Hester better suited for making plans and being strong?
- 2) How is Hester different from other women and other people?
- 3) Reread the paragraph at the bottom of page 194 that starts with, "The decision once made, a glow of strange enjoyment threw its flickering brightness over the trouble..." How does this differ from so many other passages in the novel? Examine the language, etc.
- 4) Hester takes off the letter! Your reaction. Her reaction. Her physical appearance.
- 5) Change in nature.
- 6) Dimmesdale's anxiety about Pearl.
- 7) Pearl in nature and reaction to her mother's insistence that she come over to her.

### Chapter 19

- 1) Pearl as tie and hieroglyphic
- 2) Hester's estrangement from Pearl and Pearl's refusal to come to Hester

- 3) Reread the passage where Pearl and Dimmesdale urge Hester to once more wear the letter – how do you react? What kind of language describes this scene?
- 4) Immediate change in Hester when she wears the letter again
- 5) Pearl's reaction to Dimmesdale

#### Chapter 20

- 1) Why do Hester and Dimmesdale plan on returning to Europe rather than stay in America?
- 2) Dimmesdale's reaction to the timing of their plans – how does this affect the reader's view of the character?
- 3) Change in Dimmesdale's appearance and behavior – instances of devious thoughts/urges
- 4) Interaction between Dimmesdale and Mistress Hibbins
- 5) Interaction between Dimmesdale and Chillingworth
- 6) Mystery surrounding the Election Sermon and the various drafts Dimmesdale writes/speaks

#### Chapter 21

- 1) Comparison between Hester and a dead woman
- 2) Hester's feelings about soon no longer wearing the letter
- 3) Pearl's reactions to the feelings of Hester
- 4) Pearl's response to the strange behavior of Dimmesdale
- 5) Attitude of people in town for the occasion
- 6) Magic circle around Hester and Pearl
- 7) Revelation about Chillingworth's decision to go on the ship

#### Chapter 22

- 1) Amount of respect and prestige awarded to the young minister in New England
- 2) Energy exuded by Dimmesdale in the procession
- 3) Dimmesdale's distance from Hester and Pearl and Hester's reaction to this distance
- 4) Pearl's uneasiness with Dimmesdale's behavior
- 5) Interaction/Conversation between Hester, Mistress Hibbins, and Pearl
- 6) Hester stands by the scaffold and listens to Dimmesdale's speech
- 7) Message taken to Hester from Pearl from the Indian about Chillingworth
- 8) Hester once more is an object of public spectacle and the letter burns painfully on her breast

#### Chapter 23

- 1) Dimmesdale faces impending death
- 2) Back and forth nature of the narrative between the various key characters of the story – Hawthorne's structure

- 3) Dimmesdale barely looks alive yet refuses help from the men near him. Calls out instead to Hester and Pearl.
- 4) Think about why Chillingworth tries to stop Dimmesdale from climbing on the scaffold with Hester and Pearl in front of others.
- 5) Dimmesdale's need for Hester (and her strength) with him on the scaffold
- 6) Chillingworth's comment that the scaffold is the only place where Dimmesdale can escape him
- 7) Dimmesdale's desire to "put in his plea of guilty at the bar of Eternal Justice"
- 8) Dimmesdale's speech on the scaffold
- 9) Dimmesdale reveals his chest on the scaffold – what is the effect of not exactly knowing what is there?
- 10) Dimmesdale's "escape" from Chillingworth
- 11) Pearl's kiss for Dimmesdale
- 12) Will Hester and Dimmesdale meet again?

#### Chapter 24

- 1) What was the aftermath of the scaffold scene? What were different comments about what was (or was not) seen on Dimmesdale's chest?
- 2) What is the one sentence moral suggested by Hawthorne for the "poor minister's miserable existence"?
- 3) Change in Chillingworth after Dimmesdale's death
- 4) Are hatred and love the same thing?
- 5) What would motivate Chillingworth to name Pearl in his will?
- 6) Disappearance of Pearl and Hester
- 7) Return of Hester
- 8) Guesses about Pearl
- 9) Hester wears the letter for the rest of her life
- 10) Hester's death/grave
- 11) How do you react to the conclusion? Story in general? Characters? Etc....