



THE SCARLET LETTER

(CHAPTER 2)

FICTION

Nathaniel Hawthorne
1850

INTRODUCTION

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The *Scarlet Letter* is Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1850 novel of Hester Prynne, a young mother of a newborn baby living in the Puritan settlement of Boston in 17th century New England. Branded as an adulteress and sentenced to wear a scarlet "A" as her badge of shame, Hester must endure the judgment of strict, mean-spirited townspeople. In this excerpt, after defiantly refusing to disclose the identity of the baby's father, Hester is led to the town square for public shaming.

“On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth...appeared the letter A.”



FIRST READ

NOTES

Chapter II. THE MARKET-PLACE

- 1 The grass-plot before the jail, in Prison Lane, on a certain summer morning, not less than two centuries ago, was occupied by a pretty large number of the inhabitants of Boston, all with their eyes intently fastened on the iron-clamped oaken door. Amongst any other population, or at a later period in the history of New England, the grim rigidity that petrified the bearded physiognomies of these good people would have augured some awful business in hand. It could have betokened nothing short of the anticipated execution of some noted culprit, on whom the sentence of a legal tribunal had but confirmed the verdict of public sentiment. But, in that early severity of the Puritan character, an inference of this kind could not so indubitably be drawn. It might be that a sluggish bond-servant, or an undutiful child, whom his parents had given over to the civil authority, was to be corrected at the whipping-post. It might be that an Antinomian, a Quaker, or other heterodox religionist, was to be scourged out of the town, or an idle or vagrant Indian, whom the white man's firewater had made riotous about the streets, was to be driven with stripes into the shadow of the forest. It might be, too, that a witch, like old Mistress Hibbins, the bitter-tempered widow of the magistrate, was to die upon the gallows. In either case, there was very much the same **solemnity** of demeanour on the part of the spectators, as befitted a people among whom religion and law were almost identical, and in whose character both were so thoroughly interfused, that the mildest and severest acts of public discipline were alike made venerable and awful....
- 2 “Goodwives,” said a hard-featured dame of fifty, “I’ll tell ye a piece of my mind. It would be greatly for the public behoof if we women, being of mature age and church-members in good repute, should have the handling of such malefactresses as this Hester Prynne. What think ye, gossips? If the hussy stood up for judgment before us five, that are now here in a knot together,



NOTES

would she come off with such a sentence as the worshipful magistrates have awarded? Marry, I trow not."

- 3 "People say," said another, "that the Reverend Master Dimmesdale, her godly pastor, takes it very **grievously** to heart that such a scandal should have come upon his congregation."
- 4 "The magistrates are God-fearing gentlemen, but merciful overmuch—that is a truth," added a third autumnal matron. "At the very least, they should have put the brand of a hot iron on Hester Prynne's forehead. Madame Hester would have winced at that, I warrant me. But she—the naughty baggage—little will she care what they put upon the bodice of her gown! Why, look you, she may cover it with a brooch, or such like heathenish adornment, and so walk the streets as brave as ever!"
- 5 "Ah, but," interposed, more softly, a young wife, holding a child by the hand, "let her cover the mark as she will, the pang of it will be always in her heart."
- 6 "What do we talk of marks and brands, whether on the bodice of her gown or the flesh of her forehead?" cried another female, the ugliest as well as the most pitiless of these self-constituted judges. "This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die; is there not law for it? Truly there is, both in the Scripture and the statute-book. Then let the magistrates, who have made it of no effect, thank themselves if their own wives and daughters go astray."
- 7 "Mercy on us, goodwife!" exclaimed a man in the crowd, "is there no virtue in woman, save what springs from a wholesome fear of the gallows? That is the hardest word yet! Hush now, gossips; for the lock is turning in the prison-door, and here comes Mistress Prynne herself."
- 8 The door of the jail being flung open from within there appeared, in the first place, like a black shadow emerging into sunshine, the grim and gristly presence of the town-beadle, with a sword by his side, and his staff of office in his hand. This personage prefigured and represented in his aspect the whole **dismal** severity of the Puritanic code of law, which it was his business to administer in its final and closest application to the offender. Stretching forth the official staff in his left hand, he laid his right upon the shoulder of a young woman, whom he thus drew forward, until, on the threshold of the prison-door, she repelled him, by an action marked with natural dignity and force of character, and stepped into the open air as if by her own free will. She bore in her arms a child, a baby of some three months old, who winked and turned aside its little face from the too vivid light of day; because its existence, heretofore, had brought it acquaintance only with the grey twilight of a dungeon, or other darksome apartment of the prison.



- 9 When the young woman—the mother of this child—stood fully revealed before the crowd, it seemed to be her first impulse to clasp the infant closely to her bosom; not so much by an impulse of motherly affection, as that she might thereby conceal a certain token, which was wrought or fastened into her dress. In a moment, however, wisely judging that one token of her shame would but poorly serve to hide another, she took the baby on her arm, and with a burning blush, and yet a **haughty** smile, and a glance that would not be abashed, looked around at her townspeople and neighbours. On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter A. It was so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous **luxuriance** of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel which she wore, and which was of a splendour in accordance with the taste of the age, but greatly beyond what was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony.



THINK QUESTIONS

1. Where and when does the opening scene of this chapter take place? Is Hawthorne writing about his own society or a different time period? Refer to details from the text and the introduction to support your answer.
2. How do the women of Boston feel about Hester Prynne in this scene? Quote specific words from the text to support your response.
3. What does Hawthorne mean when he writes “one token of her shame would but poorly serve to hide another” in the final paragraph? Cite details that support your response.
4. What context clues might help you to determine the meaning of the word *luxuriance* in the last paragraph? What do you think *luxuriance* means?
5. How can you figure out the part of speech and the meaning of the word *grievously* by breaking it down to its word parts?





CLOSE READ

Reread the excerpt from *The Scarlet Letter*. As you reread, complete the Focus Questions below. Then use your answers and annotations from the questions to help you complete the Writing Prompt.



FOCUS QUESTIONS

1. In the first paragraph, what does the reader learn about the Puritans' beliefs regarding sin and punishment? How does Hawthorne present the Puritanical approach to punishment? Highlight textual evidence that helps you answer these questions. Use the annotation tool to write your response to the questions.
2. How do Hawthorne's depictions of individual characters relate to the general description of Puritan society in the first paragraph? Choose two characters and explain how these characters reflect ideas about Puritan society. Highlight textual evidence that helps you answer this question. Use the annotation tool to write your response to the question.
3. Reread the second to last paragraph. How does Hawthorne describe the town-beadle and Hester Prynne? How do his descriptions shape the way readers are supposed to think and feel about these characters? What do these descriptions suggest about the story's conflict? Highlight textual evidence that helps you answer these questions. Use the annotation tool to write your response to the questions.
4. Why does the author wait so long to have Hester Prynne physically appear in the doorway to the jail? Highlight textual evidence that helps you answer this question. Use the annotation tool to write your response to the question.
5. In the last paragraph, what does the fancy embroidery of the letter A as well as her overall style of dress suggest about Hester? Highlight textual evidence that helps you answer this question. Use the annotation tool to write your response to the question.

WRITING PROMPT

How does a combination of plot, character, and setting in this excerpt from *The Scarlet Letter* reveal Hawthorne's view of the Puritans? Use your understanding of story elements to analyze the passage and describe the significance of the choices that Hawthorne made in his depiction of the plot, the characters, and the setting.

