

## Summary of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter"

The story takes place in the Puritan village of Boston, Massachusetts, during the first half of the 17th Century. Several years before the novel begins, Hester Prynne came to the New World to await the arrival of her husband who had business to conclude in Europe. However, Hester's husband was captured by Indians upon his arrival in New England and did not arrive in Boston as Hester expected. While living alone in Boston and believing her husband dead, Hester committed adultery and became pregnant. The village magistrates imprisoned her for this sin and decreed she must wear a scarlet "A" on the bodice of her dress for the rest of her life. While in prison, Hester, highly skilled in needlework, elaborately embroidered the scarlet letter with gold thread.

Before her release from prison, Hester was forced to stand on the public scaffold where all the villagers could see her. As the story opens, Hester is leaving the prison to take her position on the scaffold. She wears the scarlet letter and carries with dignity her three-month-old daughter Pearl. As Hester endures this public disgrace, Roger Chillingworth, an old man new to the village, asks members of the crowd about her and learns as much of her story as is commonly known. When he asks the identity of the child's father, he discovers Hester has refused to divulge this information. From the balcony overlooking the scaffold, the young Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale also asks for this information and eloquently appeals to Hester to publicly name her partner in sin. She refuses.

Upon her return to prison, Hester is distraught, and Roger Chillingworth, a self-proclaimed physician, comes to calm her and the babe. Chillingworth, who is actually Hester's husband, refuses to publicly acknowledge her and share in her shame. He makes Hester promise to keep his true identity secret and vows to discover and avenge himself on the man who has wronged him.

Hester and Pearl take up residence in a small cottage at the edge of the village. Using her needlework skills, Hester supports herself and Pearl by sewing for the magistrates and wealthy villagers. She also sews for the poor as an act of charity. Although they live humbly, Hester's one extravagance is the way she dresses Pearl. Hester fashions scarlet, elaborately embroidered dresses for Pearl. The townspeople generally shun Hester and her daughter.

Three years pass, and Hester learns the magistrates are considering taking Pearl away from her. Hester passionately implores Governor Bellingham to allow her to keep Pearl, who is her sole joy as well as a constant reminder of her sin. The Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale speaks in behalf of Hester, and Pearl is allowed to remain with her mother. As Hester and Pearl leave the Governor's Mansion, Mistress Hibbins, the Governor's sister, invites Hester to meet the Black Man in the forest. Hester happily declines the offer because she must take care of Pearl.

The story now turns to Roger Chillingworth. Following his secret interview with Hester in prison, Chillingworth becomes a respected member of the community and personal medical advisor to Arthur Dimmesdale, whose health is failing. Chillingworth uses his medical knowledge to treat the minister's physical condition, but suspects some wound or trouble in Dimmesdale's soul is contributing to his declining health. Intent on discovering the truth about Arthur Dimmesdale, Chillingworth one day comes upon the minister in his sleep, pushes aside his shirt, and reads the secret of the minister's heart—the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale is Hester Prynne's partner in adultery and the father of little Pearl. Chillingworth acknowledges Dimmesdale as his enemy and thus makes him the unsuspecting victim of his malevolent revenge.

Although Dimmesdale lacks the courage to confess his sin publicly and risk ruining his reputation as a man of God, he suffers privately. In addition to his constant mental torment, he punishes himself physically with a bloody scourge, fasts to the point of weakness, and keeps nightly vigils. On one of these vigil nights, seven years after Hester stood in solitary shame upon the scaffold, Dimmesdale, thinking the rest of the town is asleep, stands on that same scaffold. However, Hester and Pearl pass the scaffold as they return home from watching at the deathbed of Governor Winthrop. Dimmesdale invites them to ascend the steps and the three stand together on the scaffold. Pearl asks him if they will stand together tomorrow, but Dimmesdale tells her it cannot be. Chillingworth sees the trio on the scaffold. Dimmesdale appeals to Hester for support against the nameless horror he feels for Chillingworth. Hiding his hatred for Dimmesdale, Chillingworth approaches and leads the minister back home.

Hester is shocked by the decay of Dimmesdale's nerve and moral force. She infers Chillingworth to be the insidious cause of his weakened state. Realizing she has allowed this to happen by keeping Chillingworth's identity a secret, Hester resolves to talk to her former husband and try to rescue Dimmesdale from his evil influence. Soon after, Hester approaches Chillingworth and asks him to stop tormenting Dimmesdale. When Chillingworth refuses, she tells her former husband she must reveal the secret of his identity. Chillingworth tells her to do what she will with the minister.

Several days later, Hester intercepts Arthur Dimmesdale as he is walking through the forest. The two retreat to the seclusion of the woods and talk while Pearl plays among the nearby trees. Arthur tells Hester he detests living a lie and is relieved to look into the eyes of one who knows him for what he really is. Hester tells him that Chillingworth also possesses this knowledge, and that he was the husband she betrayed. Dimmesdale is initially horrified, but soon forgives Hester for keeping Chillingworth's secret. Fearing further revenge from Chillingworth, Dimmesdale asks Hester what he should do. She suggests they leave Boston and return to the Old World. Arthur agrees, and they plan to leave aboard the ship currently in the harbor. In their newly discovered freedom, Hester removes the scarlet letter and the cap which binds her hair. Hester wants Arthur to know Pearl and summons her from the trees. But Pearl, distressed by her mother's altered appearance, comes reluctantly. Pearl then bursts into a fit of passion and insists her mother don the letter and cap before she will behave civilly. Hester does this sadly. Dimmesdale gives the child a kiss, which she immediately washes off in the brook.

Upon returning to the village, Hester makes arrangements with the ship's captain for the passage. Arthur is secretly pleased they will not leave until after Election Day when he will have the honor of delivering the Election Sermon. When Election Day arrives, the ship's captain tells Hester that Chillingworth will be traveling with them. Hester cannot warn Dimmesdale of this new development because the Election Procession, of which he is part, is beginning. Reverend Dimmesdale's sermon is a brilliant triumph, but as the procession is leaving the church, he surprises everyone by inviting Hester and Pearl to ascend the scaffold with him once again, this time in front of the entire village. Chillingworth tries unsuccessfully to dissuade Dimmesdale from this action. Hester supports Arthur, and Pearl holds his hand as the three of them climb onto the scaffold. The scaffold is the only place Roger Chillingworth dares not follow Dimmesdale, and he looks on unhappily as Dimmesdale escapes his revenge.

On the scaffold, Dimmesdale confesses his sin and tears away his shirt to reveal what appears to be a scarlet "A" on his own breast. Chillingworth laments that Dimmesdale has escaped him, and Dimmesdale tells him he too has sinned deeply. Pearl kisses her father's lips and her tears fall on his cheek. A dying man, Dimmesdale bids Hester farewell, but cannot assure her they will meet again in Heaven, reminding her of the gravity of their sin.

Dimmesdale is buried in the village cemetery. Roger Chillingworth dies within the year, leaving Pearl a considerable amount of property. Hester and Pearl leave Boston, but years later, Hester returns and takes up residence in her old cottage where she lives until she dies. She is buried next to Dimmesdale, and although their graves do not touch, they share a common gravestone.

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