

The Scarlet Letter Study Guide

Student Name:

Everyone Makes a Mistake

Have you ever felt ostracized from those you love and care about for something you did, whether intentionally or accidentally? Who was angrier with you – your friends or your family? If so, you can probably empathize with Hester Prynne, the main character of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Due to one misstep from her Puritan society's strict moral and social code, Hester is cast out, ostracized, and treated as a pariah by her fellow townspeople.

Be a Better Reader

As you work through the study guide for *The Scarlet Letter*, you will also practice these skills, which will help you when you read novels in the future, for school assignments or just for fun.

1. Describe the development of the main character.
2. Discuss how the plot develops throughout the novel.
3. Describe themes in the novel and trace their development throughout the text.
4. Cite textual evidence to support discussion of the novel.
5. Describe and analyze the role of setting in the novel.

Behind the Scenes

Nathaniel Hawthorne termed *The Scarlet Letter* a psychological romance because it focuses on the inner turmoil of its characters and utilizes layers of symbolism, as opposed to many of the realistic novels of its day. When Hawthorne wrote and published the novel in 1849 and 1850, he set it amid the Massachusetts Puritan colony which formed the basis of his community. In so doing, he portrayed Puritans as unforgiving people who saw the world in black and white, right and wrong. They enforced a rigid morality and firmly punished anyone who dared stray from those boundaries. Hawthorne, however, chose to create a Puritan society in which lines are not so clearly drawn, one that allows the reader to be drawn into the story and make judgments for himself about the characters and their sins.

Get This!

1. *The Scarlet Letter* is awash in symbolism. Be sure to notice and try to figure out the symbolism of the scarlet letter, the meteor, the scaffold, and Pearl.
2. Throughout the novel, Hawthorne hints at the nature of and what constitutes evil. As you read, determine if you agree with Puritan society's view that Hester Prynne commits the greatest act of evil or see if you think another character better embodies evil itself.
3. Notice how Hawthorne uses characters' names, night and day, and civilization and society to enhance and tell the story.

Scarlet Letter Student Copy Study Guide Key

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