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SAMPLE EXCERPTS FROM THE MONKEYNOTES FOR *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne. These are only excerpts of sections. This does not represent the entire note or content of the sections within the note.

The Scarlet Letter
by
Nathaniel Hawthorne



EDITED BY DIANE SAUDER

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

The *Scarlet Letter* is set in the seventeenth century, puritanical, New England colony of Massachusetts. The complete action is set in the town of Boston

CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Hester Prynne - the protagonist of the novel who is an English woman and the wife of Roger Chillingworth. She is tried and condemned for her sin of adultery with Dimmesdale and charged to wear the scarlet letter, "A", an indication of adultery, on the bosom of her gown forever. Even though she has a daughter out of wedlock, she refuses to reveal who.....

Arthur Dimmesdale - the young, handsome, and unmarried pastor of Hester's church. Apart from committing adultery with Hester, he is guilty of

Roger Chillingworth - a scholarly physician who has sent his wife ahead of him to America. He fails to join her quickly, for he is captured by

Pearl - the beautiful daughter of

Minor Characters

Governor Bellingham - the governor of the colony. He is based on an actual person who served as the governor in Boston for several terms. He first appears

John Wilson - the eldest clergyman in Boston in the novel. He is also.....

Mistress Hibbins - the ill-tempered sister of Governor Bellingham in the novel. She is based upon another actual figure from history, who was executed for.....

The Sexton - a worker in Dimmesdale's church. When he finds

The Captain - the commander of the ship that is to take Hester, Dimmesdale, and Pearl away. He plays an important role in escalating the **CONFLICT**

Protagonists

The protagonists of the novel are Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale, both bearers of

Antagonist

The antagonist is the effort to hide the identify of the male

Climax

The climax occurs at the second scaffold scene, when Dimmesdale stands on the scaffold with Hester and Pearl, finally divulging his secret, but still in the darkness of night. Ironically, while standing there, Dimmesdale notices a large meteor in the sky that

Outcome

The novel openly ends in tragedy, for the secret of Hester and Dimmesdale becomes public knowledge when the minister

PLOT (Synopsis)

Clutching her baby to her chest, the beautiful and poised Hester Prynne stands on the scaffold in the square of the small town of Boston. She is being punished for the adultery that she has committed. The townsfolk, especially the women, are not very happy about the fact that Hester has been punished only by making her wear a scarlet on her dress and standing on a scaffold for several hours of public humiliation. The judge has been lenient on her because

THEME

The central theme of the novel is that unconfessed sin destroys the soul. Hester's sin of adultery has been confessed, and as its symbol, she wears the Scarlet Letter A. As a result, the sin does not destroy her inward spirit; instead, she gathers her strength and courage, and flourishes in spite of the Letter A. In total contrast to Hester, Dimmesdale does not confess his

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

Nathaniel Hawthorne, (1804 - 1864), short story writer and novelist, was one of the foremost nineteenth century writers in America. He was born on July 4, 1804, in Salem Massachusetts. His Puritan ancestors were the first settlers in the state and included two prominent judges, one of whom was active in the persecution of Quakers in the 1630's and the other in the witch trials. By Hawthorne's time, the family had retired from public eminence. Both his father and grandfather were captains of merchant ships.

Hawthorne was a quiet, meditative child and a good student. In 1821, he attended college in Maine, and some aspects of his student career there suggested that his habits of solitude were temporarily modified. His classmates were generally of the view that he was aloof.

In 1837, Hawthorne published *Twice Told Tales*. In 1839 he obtained a position as an inspector at the Boston Custom House, weighing and measuring the goods shipped in and out of the harbor. Distracted from doing any substantive literary work, Hawthorne was glad to

LITERARY/HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The *Scarlet Letter* is set in seventeenth century New England, and Hawthorne successfully depicts the Puritanism that was found there. Puritanism actually began in England and was aimed at purging the Church of its ostentation and corruption. The prevalent amorality in society also became the object of attack by the Puritans who insisted on orthodoxy and strict rules of living.

In America, Puritanism was spread by the early English settlers, the Pilgrim fathers who left England to avoid religious oppression. Settling down in New England, they gradually formed colonies and began implementing puritanical rules. Apart from religious orthodoxy, they also insisted that the state follow

the laws laid down by the church. The extreme narrow-mindedness, even restricting church.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

PREFACE: Custom House

In the "Custom House," written as an introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne gives an autobiographical description of his life and times. The detailed descriptions of the scenes and people not only prepare the reader for the author's style, but also aim at recreating the author's past. The preface concentrates on the author's period of service at the Custom House during which time he came into contact with several people and had the opportunity to study human behavior. The description of his co-employees and others shows the author's deft hand at characterization, which is revealed during the novel. Further, the preface serves the purpose of giving a background to the novel and introduces America's Puritanical ancestors. Through the novel, by taking a favorable view of Hester and Dimmesdale and by drawing Chillingworth in evil proportions, Hawthorne attempts to undo the wrong and injustice done by his ancestors. The reference to the discovery of the scarlet letter and some papers referring to the incident of a woman condemned like Hester is to strengthen the author's claim of the authenticity of the story.

CHAPTER 1: The Prison Door

The first chapter gives a description of the dark and gloomy nature of the prison that was established in the "vicinity of Cornhill" by the early settlers. The prison is described as an "ugly edifice" and "black flower of civilized society". Weeds grow in front of the gloomy structure, where a group of Puritans, dressed normally in their dull clothing, has gathered. The only positive image in the whole setting is a single rosebush that stands beside the weeds. It foreshadows that there will be some brightness amidst this "tale of human frailty and sorrow."

Notes

The purpose of this opening chapter is to set the scene for the novel in seventeenth century Boston. A crowd of Puritans has gathered at the prison and as always, they wear "sad-colored" clothing. The description of the dark and gloomy prison sets the mood for the entire story and foreshadows the situations of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale. She is outwardly "imprisoned" for her sin through her alienation and isolation; he is inwardly "imprisoned" by his mental anguish and deterioration. Hawthorne obviously chooses to begin his novel with a prison, an appropriate symbol for the punishment that the protagonists will suffer.

In the midst of the dark description of the prison, there is a single rose bush. It is said to spring from the footsteps of Anne Hutchinson, an actual Puritan woman who questioned the strictness of her religion and was later judged by some as a martyr for it. The rose, in its brightness and beauty, is an obvious symbol for Hester Prynne, who has similarities to Anne Hutchinson. In spite of the darkness of her situation in the novel, Hester lives in truth, pride, goodness, and honor, openly confessing her sin. She becomes like a "martyr", suffering in silence and refusing to reveal the identity of her partner.

The closing lines of the chapter briefly state that the narrative is a story of human weakness (the passion between Hester and Dimmesdale) and the resulting sorrows for their actions.

CHAPTER 2: The Market-Place

A number of people gathered in front of the prison door are eagerly waiting for the appearance of Hester Prynne. Through the gossip of some of the women, the reader learns about Hester, to whom they refer as a "hussy". She has committed the sin of adultery and has been punished to a sentence of wearing the letter "A" on her dress as a symbol of her sin. It is also through their discussion that Reverend Master Dimmesdale, the pastor of Hester's church, is introduced.

As the prison door is thrown open, Hester is led out by a prison official. She is described as a tall, young, proud, and beautiful woman with good features. As she steps out of the prison clutching her three-month-old baby to her, she appears dignified and protective of her daughter. What attracts the attention of the crowd is the letter "A", now elaborately embroidered in gold thread and attached to her dress. Hester has obviously steeled herself for this public encounter, for the condemnation and humiliation do not seem to have any affect on her.

From the prison, Hester is led through the unsympathetic crowd to the market place. There, she is placed on a scaffold in order to disgrace her and to reveal the letter "A" on her dress. The Governor, his counselors, a judge, a general, and the ministers are amongst the assembled crowd, which has turned "somber and grave". Hester strengthens herself to bear her disgrace.

As Hester remains on the platform under full and contemptuous public gaze, her mind turns to her childhood, to her life with her parents, and to her life with her husband (who is only physically described as a misshapen scholar without any reference to his name or current status with Hester). As the "exhibition of these phantasmagoric forms" flit before her mind's eye, Hester brings herself back to the reality of her child and her shame.

Notes

As the chapter unfolds, further details are presented about the Puritanical outlook. The crowd who condemns Hester is harsh, stern, and cruel. The "goodwives" feel that she should be more seriously punished. A lone voice speaks in support of Hester's painful suffering. Hawthorne is obviously critical of the crowd. The author, however, depicts Hester in sympathetic terms. She is proud, beautiful, and in control - a picture of "Madonna and Child" as she stands clutching her daughter. She seems to have "made a halo of the misfortune and ignominy in which she was enveloped." Hawthorne also gives additional details of her physical appearance and her background, and hints at her strength and defiance, having embroidered the Letter "A" in gold thread, as if to turn something ugly into something beautiful and as if to call attention to her shame.

It is important to note that the pious pastor Dimmesdale is present at the scaffold scene and displays great grief for his parishioner. The deformed Chillingworth also watches the events.

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTERS

Hester Prynne

Hester is the protagonist of the novel. She is described as a youthful, beautiful, spirited, and proud woman. When she is first presented in the story, there is already a scandal attached to her name that is symbolized by the scarlet letter "A". When she walks to the scaffold from the prison, she holds her head high and remains in full public view without shedding a tear. Her spirit is also reflected in her decorating

the scarlet letter with gold thread.

Hester's strength of character in public, is in fact, her way of steeling herself against her inner wounds inflicted by her infamy and scourged by the scarlet letter. Her weakness is revealed in her private vent of her grief through tears. Her silent suffering eventually wins the sympathy of others but still fails to gain her complete acceptance by the Puritan society that surrounds her.

Hester's self-inflicted austerity and her life of seclusion show her

PURITANISM IN THE NOVEL

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is set in the seventeenth century New England town of Boston, a staunch Puritanical town. It is a moralistic and

THE TITLE OF THE BOOK

The title is significant to every chapter of the book, as the scarlet letter is displayed in many forms. First, Hester is made to wear the scarlet letter

ANALYSIS OF PLOT STRUCTURE

The Scarlet Letter is a unified, masterfully written novel. It is structured around three crucial scaffold scenes and three major characters that are all related. The story is about Hester Prynne, who is given a scarlet letter to wear as a symbol of her adultery. Her life is closely tied to two men, Roger Chillingworth, her husband, and Arthur Dimmesdale, her minister and

SYMBOLISM

The Scarlet Letter abounds with symbolism, which Hawthorne uses to unify the novel and add a deeper level of meaning to the story. The chief symbol in the novel is the scarlet letter "A", which openly symbolizes Hester's adultery. For Dimmesdale and Hester, the scarlet

AMBIGUITY

A study of *The Scarlet Letter* reveals that Hawthorne intentionally includes many ambiguities in the story, allowing the reader to reach his own conclusions. A major use of ambiguity occurs in Hawthorne's treatment of Mistress Hibbins. She never becomes a major character in the novel, but she appears momentarily, in person or by implication, in most of the

QUESTIONS

1. Who is the protagonist(s) of the book? What is the antagonist?
2. Discuss the significance of the title of the book.....

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