

Study Guide prepared by
Catherine Bush
Barter Playwright-in-Residence

The Scarlet Letter
Adapted by Catherine Bush
from the novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne



*Especially for Grades 7-12

By the Barter Players - Barter On Demand

(NOTE: standards included for reading *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, seeing a performance of the play On Demand, and completing the study guide.)

Virginia SOLs

English – 7.1, 7.4, 7.5, 7.7, 7.9, 8.2, 8.4, 8.5, 8.7, 8.9, 9.1, 9.3, 9.4, 9.6, 9.8, 10.3, 10.4, 10.6, 10.8, 11.3, 11.6, 11.8, 12.1, 12.3, 12.4, 12.6

Theatre Arts – 7.6, 7.18, 7.20, 8.5, 8.12, 8.18, 8.22, TI.10, TI.11, TI.13, TI.17, TII.6, TII.9, TII.12, TII.15, TII.17, TIII.11, TIII.12, TIV.12, TIV.13

Tennessee/North Carolina Common Core State Standards

English Language Arts – Reading Literacy: 7.1, 7.3, 7.4, 7.7, 7.9, 8.1, 8.3, 8.4, 8.6, 8.7, 9-10.1, 9-10.3, 9-10.4, 9-10.7, 11-12.1, 11-12.3, 11-12.4, 11-12.7

English Language Arts – Writing: 7.1, 7.3, 7.7, 7.8, 7.9, 8.1, 8.3, 8.7, 8.8, 8.9, 9-10.1, 9-10.3, 9-10.7, 9-10.8, 9-10.9, 11-12.1, 11-12.3, 11-12.7, 11-12.8, 11-12.9

Tennessee State Standards

Theatre 6-8 – 7.1, 7.2 **Theatre 9-12** – 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 7.1, 7.2

North Carolina Essential Standards

Theatre Arts – 7.A.1, 7.AE.1, 7.CU.1, 8.A.1, 8.AE.1, 8.CU.1, 8.CU.2, B.C.1, B.C.2, B.A.1, B.AE.1, B.CU.1, B.CU.2, I.A.1, I.AE.1, I.CU.2, P.C.1, P.A.1, P.AE.1, A.C.2, A.A.1, A.AE.1

Setting

The town of Boston in the Colony of Massachusetts, 1649



Characters

Hester Prynne – A young mother accused of adultery

Arthur Dimmesdale – A well-respected minister

Roger Chillingworth – Hester's older husband

Mistress Hibbins – a witch

Pearl – Hester's illegitimate daughter

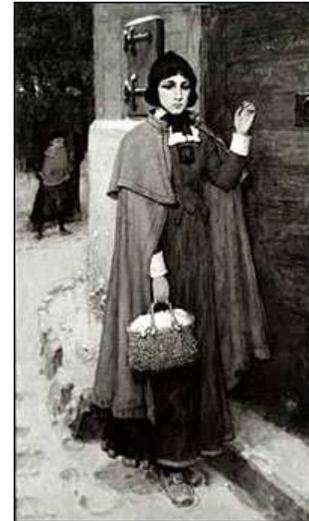
Governor Bellingham – The governor of Massachusetts.

Old Scratch – a legendary figure presumed to be evil.

Goody Elder – A town gossip

Goody Younger – A town gossip

Beadle – a law enforcement officer



Vocabulary Words

magistrate

scaffold

adultery

iniquity

behoove

scandal

congregation

goodwife

bodice

confess

commission

salvation

hypocrisy

hussy

alchemy

misbegotten

adversities

defamation

ruination

vile

assessment

reputation

guardian

palpable

reiterate

acquiesce

blasphemy

jeopardy

compensation

retribution

Providence

scandal

remedies

diagnose

transformation

gallows

fiend

avenge

confinement

epoch

recompense

Define each of the vocabulary words listed above then write sentences using them. Remember: anyone reading your sentence should be able to understand the word from the context in which it is used.

Synopsis

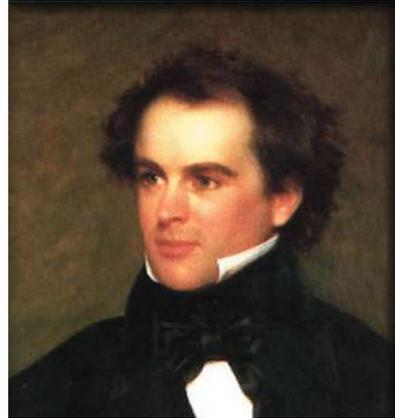
Hester Prynne has been living alone in Boston for two years. Her husband, who was to sail from England to join her, has not been seen and is presumed lost at sea. When Hester becomes pregnant and gives birth to a daughter named Pearl, she is convicted of adultery and sentenced to wear a scarlet letter “A” affixed to her dress for the remainder of her life.



Hester refuses to name the father of her baby, despite repeated attempts from her minister, Reverend Dimmesdale, to make her do so. Then an elderly stranger, Roger Chillingworth, comes to town. Chillingworth reveals himself to Hester and we discover that he is actually her husband, Roger Prynne. Chillingworth explains that he was shipwrecked and captured by Indians. He has recently escaped and is furious to find his wife holding another man’s baby. He asks that she name the father but again, Hester refuses. Chillingworth then demands that Hester keep his identity a secret as well so that he may discover the culprit’s name for himself. Hester reluctantly agrees and Chillingworth establishes himself in the community as a physician. One of his patients is the minister Reverend Dimmesdale. Dimmesdale is suffering from a strange malady that seems to be robbing him of his very will to live. Chillingworth and Dimmesdale become friends. The years pass by and little Pearl grows into a young girl whose headstrong behavior is considered a threat to the town’s Puritanical sensibilities. Governor Bellingham considers removing Pearl from Hester’s custody but Dimmesdale, at Hester’s behest, steps in and prevents this from happening. Chillingworth has become convinced that Dimmesdale is Pearl’s father and is torturing him with guilt. Hester realizes that Chillingworth has guessed the truth and decides to reveal Chillingworth’s true identity to Dimmesdale. Dimmesdale is horrified and Hester suggests that Dimmesdale leave Boston forever. When he balks at leaving alone, she offers to go with him. Convinced that they can find happiness as a family, Dimmesdale agrees. Hester books passage to England but before they depart, Dimmesdale must preach one last sermon. While doing so, he collapses and crawls to the scaffold, standing there with Pearl and Hester. He finally admits his guilt to the whole assembly and dies in Hester’s arms.

Biography of the Author

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born July 4, 1804 in Salem, Massachusetts. His father was a sea captain, who died when the boy was only four. Reared in a reclusive setting, Hawthorne became an avid reader. His uncle sent him to Bowdoin College, where Hawthorne became good friends with future president, Franklin Pierce, and future poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Hawthorne started writing, and by the time he was 33, he was beginning to be noticed. Critics credit Hawthorne with making the short story acceptable literature in America, especially after his *Twice Told Tales* was published in 1837.



Haunted by his Puritan past, including a grandfather who was a judge at the Salem Witch Trials, Hawthorne wrote many of his novels and short stories, including *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), and *Young Goodman Brown* (1855) with deeply Puritanical themes. His contributions to American literature include his meticulous style, intriguing themes, complex symbolism, and psychological insights into human nature. Hawthorne married his Salem neighbor Sophia Peabody in 1842. They had three children: Una, Julian and Rose. Hawthorne died on May 19, 1864.

Biography of the Playwright

Catherine Bush has been Barter Theatre's playwright-in-residence since 2007. Her produced plays include: *The Other Side of the Mountain*, *The Quiltmaker*, *Comin' Up A Storm*, *Wooden Snowflakes*, *Tradin' Paint*, *Where Trouble Sleeps*, *Walking Across Egypt*, *I'll Never Be Hungry Again* (book & lyrics), *The Three Musketeers*, *The Frankenstein Summer*, *unHINGEd*, *The Executioner's Sons*, *The Controversial Rescue of Fatty the Pig*, *Winter Wheat* (book & lyrics) and *Just a Kiss*. Plays for Young Audiences: *Cry Wolf!*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Rapunzel*, *Great Expectations*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, *All I Want for Christmas is My Two Front Teeth*, *My Imaginary Pirate*, *The Call of the Wild*, *The Princess and the Pea*, *Aesop's Fables*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *Frosty*, *Santa Claus is Coming to Town*, *Mother Goose: The Musical*, *'Twas the Night Before Christmas*, *Jingle All the Way*, *Old Turtle and the Broken Truth*, *Antigone*, *Robin Hood*, *Clementine the Musical*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Tarzan*, and *Peter Pan*.



www.catherinebushplays.com



A Brief History

Barter Theatre was founded during the Great Depression by Robert Porterfield, an enterprising young actor. He and his fellow actors found themselves out of work and hungry in New York City. Porterfield contrasted that to the abundance of food, but lack of live theatre, around his home region in Southwest Virginia. He returned to Washington County with an extraordinary proposition: bartering produce from the farms and gardens of the area to gain admission to see a play.

Barter Theatre opened its doors on June 10, 1933 proclaiming, “With vegetables you cannot sell, you can buy a good laugh.” The price of admission was 40 cents or the equivalent in produce, the concept of trading “ham for Hamlet” caught on quickly. At the end of the first season, the Barter Company cleared \$4.35 in cash, two barrels of jelly and enjoyed a collective weight gain of over 300 pounds.

Playwrights including Noel Coward, Tennessee Williams and Thornton Wilder accepted Virginia ham as payment for royalties. An exception was George Bernard Shaw, a vegetarian, who bartered the rights to his plays for spinach.

Today, Barter Theatre has a reputation as a theatre where many actors performed before going on to achieve fame and fortune. The most recognized of these alumni include Gregory Peck, Patricia Neal, Ernest Borgnine, Hume Cronyn, Ned Beatty, Gary Collins, Larry Linville and Frances Fisher. The list also included James Burrows, creator of *Cheers*, Barry Corbin, and the late Jim Varney.

Robert Porterfield passed away in 1971. His successor, Rex Partington, had been at Barter in the 1950s as an actor and in the 1970s as stage manager. Rex returned as chief administrator from 1972 until his retirement in 1992. In March 2006, he passed away.

Richard Rose was named the Producing Artistic Director in October 1992. During his tenure, attendance grew from 42,000 to more than 163,000 annual patrons. Significant capital improvements were also made, including renovation of the main stage (now Gilliam Stage) in 1995 and the 2006 addition of The Barter Café at Stage II (now the Smith Theatre). Rose retired in December of 2019 and Katy Brown, who had been at Barter since 1998 as the Director of the Barter Players and as an Associate Artistic Director, was named the fourth Producing Artistic Director – and is the first woman to hold the position.

Barter represents two distinct venues of live theatre: Barter Theatre’s Gilliam Stage, and Barter’s Smith Theatre. Gilliam Stage, with over 500 seats, features traditional theatre in a luxurious setting. Barter’s Smith Theatre offers seating for 167 around a thrust stage in an intimate setting and is perfect for more adventurous productions. Barter Theatre is also home to The Barter Players, a talented ensemble who produce plays for young audiences throughout the year.

History is always in the making at Barter Theatre, building on legends of the past; Barter looks forward to the challenge of growth in the future.

From the Page to the Stage!

How does a book become a stage play? Here are some of the elements that went into the Barter Players' production of *The Scarlet Letter*...

1. Script

It all starts here. A playwright (in this case, Playwright-in-Residence Catherine Bush) turns the prose of literature into dialogue and dramatic action. This is called "adapting". Sound easy? **Try it yourself!** Pick a scene from your favorite story and adapt it into a scene for the stage. Try not to use the narrative voice – focus instead on creating "dialogue" between the characters.

2. Director/Actors

The director and actors begin the rehearsal process. The director "blocks" the play, which means he tells the actors where to move and stand and sit. The actors work on learning their lines, finding their character's motivation and creating the world of the play. The length of a rehearsal process for a Barter Player production ranges from 30 – 40 hours spread out over 3-4 weeks, depending on the play.

3. Set Design

The set designer designs a set that will not only serve the aesthetic needs of the production by creating visuals that represent the various locations in the story (i.e. the scaffold, Hester's house, the woods) but also function as a safe environment upon which the actors will move (or be moved). A good set design will also allow the action to flow from one scene to another smoothly, with seamless transitions. **Try it yourself!** Using the scene you adapted, design a set that will both visually serve the story and function effectively for the actors.

4. Costumes/Wigs

The costume designer is responsible for creating a different look for each character while maintaining the overall aesthetic of the production. Each actor's costume must be tailored to fit and be built to take the wear-and-tear of 6 shows a week *plus* tour! Also, in a show where the actor is required to play more than one character, the design must incorporate a method to facilitate "quick changes". The wig designer is responsible for designing, building and styling the wigs that will appear in the show. Like the costumes, wigs are necessary to help distinguish characters. **Try it yourself!** Design a costume/wig for the character in your scene. Make sure your costume includes a mechanism to make "quick changes possible."

5. Props

Pearl's rose! Dimmesdale's bible! These are a few examples of the props designed and built by Barter's props department for this production. A **prop** is defined as an object used on stage by actors for use in the plot or story line of a theatrical production. **Try it yourself!** Design and build the props you will need for your scene.

6. Lights/Sound

Lights not only illuminate the actors and pull focus to various spots on the stage but, together with sound, help create a mood. Lights and sound can also, along with the set, help establish location. The sound of a bell tolling, moonlight washing over a wooden platform and voila! We are in the Boston's town square at night! **Try it yourself!** Put together a soundtrack for your scene that establishes place and mood. Feel free to use recorded music/sound effects or perform it live!

7. Stage Manager

The Stage Manager attends all the rehearsals and once the show goes into production, is "in charge", calling all the sound and light cues and maintaining the integrity of the piece during its run.

Questions and Activities

1. Read *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne then watch a performance of The Barter Players' On Demand production. How are they similar? How are they different?

Write a paper that compares and contrasts the book with The Barter Players' production!

2. *The Scarlet Letter* is set in Massachusetts. Who founded the colony of Massachusetts and when? From what country did these settlers come? What reasons did they have to leave their native country? Locate the state of Massachusetts on a map of the United States. How did these settlers travel to the "New World?" **Discuss.**

The beginning of *The Scarlet Letter* is set in the year 1649. **Using the internet, research what the town of Boston looked like in that year.** How tall were the buildings? What materials were used to build them? How many people lived in Boston at the time? What different ethnicities made up the population? Now do the same research for the year 1852 (the year Nathaniel Hawthorne published *The Scarlet Letter*) and again for the year 2020-2021. **Make a collage of images** from each of these time periods. How has Boston changed over the years? How has it remained the same? **Present your findings to the class in an oral report.**

3. Who is the father of Hester's baby? Why does Hester refuse to name him? Why does the baby's father refuse to step forward and identify himself? What would happen to him if he did? Would Hester's life be better or worse if the father of her child were known? **Discuss.**



4. In this play, we meet the character of "Old Scratch, known in the novel as "The Black Man." Who is this character and what is his purpose in this story? What is the relationship between Old Scratch and Chillingworth? Old Scratch and Dimmesdale? Hester? Pearl? Mistress Hibbins? **Discuss.**

5. What is Hester Prynne's crime? What is her punishment? What sort of punishment would the Puritan women have given Hester if it were left up to them? What was the usual punishment for adultery at this time? Why was Hester's punishment less severe? What did the magistrates hope to accomplish by sentencing Hester to wear the scarlet letter?

Discuss how letters and other symbols have been used on clothing throughout history to make a statement about the person wearing them (i.e. the "letter sweater" for athletes, the Star of David used to denote Jewish ancestry during the Holocaust). How is it that the same symbols used to separate us can also be used to celebrate us?



"I'd like to exchange this for another letter, please. This one just isn't working out for me."

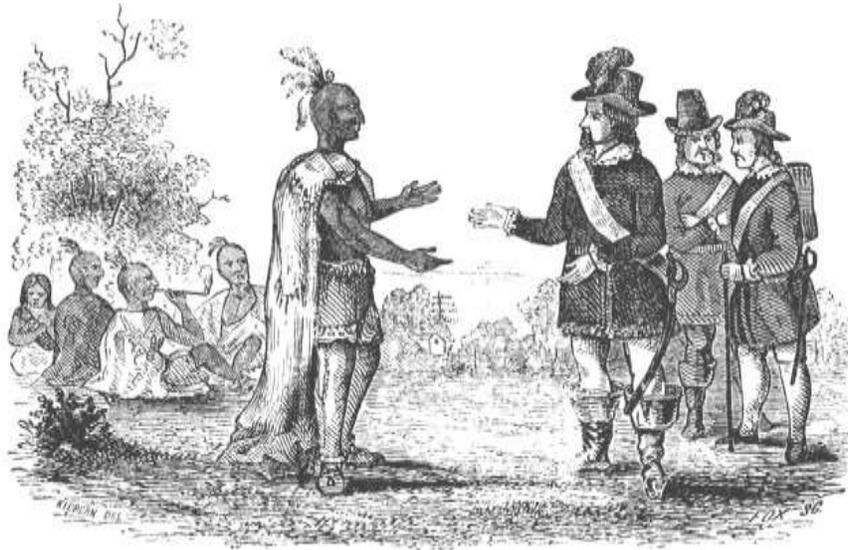
6. The scarlet letter A renders Hester Prynne an outcast in society. Who are considered the outcasts of our society today? What defines them as outcasts?

Discuss situations where those who have been considered outcasts have "struck back" at society. How do their actions differ from Hester's reaction to her sentence? **As a society, do we have a moral responsibility to those we have "cast out?"** If no, what are the potential consequences? **Discuss.**

7. Several years pass between scenes in this play. How is this time passage communicated? What are the various clues we are given? Can you think of other ways to communicate time passage to an audience?

8. Hester named her daughter "Pearl" after the expression "pearl of great price." Where did that expression come from? What does it signify? Why did Hester choose it for her daughter?

9. Chillingworth tells Hester that after he was shipwrecked, he was held captive by “Indians.” Assuming Chillingworth was shipwrecked somewhere along the coast of Massachusetts, which Native American tribe or tribes might he have been referring to? How did the various tribes of this area interact with the colonists of Boston? **Present your findings to the class.**



INTERVIEW BETWEEN THE INDIANS AND GOVERNOR WINTHROP.

10. Chillingworth undergoes a change during the course of this story. How does he change and why? Does vengeance make Chillingworth happy? How would *The Scarlet Letter* have ended if Chillingworth had chosen to forgive Hester? Dimmesdale? **What role does Chillingworth’s need for vengeance play in the climax of this story? Discuss.**

11. Assume the identity of one of the following characters: Hester, Chillingworth or Dimmesdale. As that character, **keep a journal during the course of the story.** Be sure your journal entries include your thoughts and feelings regarding these specific events: the day of Hester’s sentencing, the night Hester, Dimmesdale and Pearl stood upon the scaffold, and the night before Hester and Dimmesdale are to sail to England. **Discuss how “point-of-view” affects the interpretation of a story.**

PERSUADE ME!

Write a paper persuading Hester to leave Boston and the scarlet A behind her.

12. The play you saw was a *touring* show, therefore the set, costumes, lights, sound and props were kept to a minimum. **Pick a scene from *The Scarlet Letter* and design a set for it** that would work in your school's auditorium. Keep in mind sightlines as well as the placement of entrances and exits. **Once you have designed your set on paper, make a to-scale model of it. Present it to your class** and explain how it would work. Is it possible to design a set that would function for every different scene in the play?

13. What is the relationship between religion and law in Puritan New England? What is the relationship between religion and law in the United States today? Search the newspapers and magazines for stories and articles that exemplify this relationship. **How do we in this country define "freedom of religion" and "separation of Church and State?"** Why are these two tenets important? **Discuss.**

14. The Puritan community initially defined Hester by the sin she had committed. Think of a modern day person who has committed some "sin" for which they are known, thus being symbolically "branded with a scarlet letter." What did they do? What must their life be like? Is this fair?

Write a paper arguing that, in Nathaniel Hawthorne's opinion, the greatest sin in *The Scarlet Letter* was committed by Puritan society.

15. What makes someone a "hero"? Is Hester Prynne the hero of *The Scarlet Letter*? If so, why? Why did Hester remain in Boston after her sentencing? What other options did she have? What would you have done in her circumstances? Do we have people in our society today who have made names for themselves by "suffering in silence?" Who are they? Do we consider them "heroic"? **Discuss.**

16. Hester has learned to live with her scarlet letter. Dimmesdale, however, is hardly able to cope with his guilt. Do you think he would have been better off if Hester had named him Pearl's father seven years earlier? Why didn't she? Was this her responsibility or his? **Discuss.**

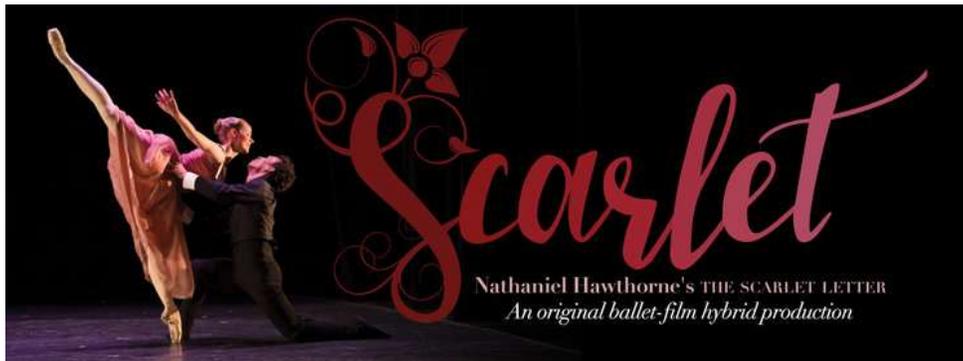


17. What sort of punishment does Dimmesdale inflict upon himself for his sin?

18. Consider the “sins” of the three major characters: Hester, Dimmesdale and Chillingworth. Whose sin is the greatest? Why? What makes one sin greater than another? By what criteria do we judge wrongdoing? **Discuss.**

19. Is Arthur Dimmesdale a remarkably strong character to have carried his burden of guilt for so many years? Or was he weak for not having the courage to confess? Given what you know about him, would he have been able to run away with Hester and Pearl and start a new life?

20. This play is adapted from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel and because it was written for a touring company, certain elements from the novel were left out of the script. This happens frequently when a book is adapted into a different medium. What other ways could this story be told? Through dance? Through music? Through pictures? Through a collage of current event headlines? **Working in groups, pick your favorite chapter from the book or your favorite scene from the play and recreate it using another medium of your choice. Present it to your class.** Be prepared to discuss why you picked certain elements from the story to recreate and not others.



21. After so many years, Hester has difficulty finding the courage to speak to Chillingworth. Suppose she decided to contact him in writing instead. **Put yourself in Hester’s place, and write the letter she might have written.** Before you begin, identify three or four specific statements you want to make. Then build the letter around them. Remember, you and Chillingworth share a secret, but you have not communicated with the man in seven long years.

Write a critique of The Barter Players' production of *The Scarlet Letter*. Be sure to include what you liked, didn't like and what you would have done differently.

Comedy vs. Tragedy



comedy: a dramatic work that is light and often humorous or satirical in tone and that usually contains a happy resolution of the thematic conflict.

tragedy: A drama or literary work in which the main character is brought to ruin or suffers extreme sorrow, especially as a consequence of a tragic flaw, moral weakness, or inability to cope with unfavorable circumstances.

Given these definitions, would you categorize *The Scarlet Letter* as a comedy or a tragedy? **Cite three samples from the play to support your position.** Does a character's point-of-view influence your findings? **Discuss.**

Irony: *a literary technique, originally used in Greek tragedy, by which the full significance of a character's words or actions are clear to the audience or reader although unknown to the character.*

22. Examine Dimmesdale's sentence to Gov. Bellingham: "*This child of its father's guilt and its mother's shame has come from the hand of God, to work in many ways upon her heart, who pleads so earnestly, and with such bitterness of spirit, the right to keep her.*"

Why is this ironic? Can you find other examples of irony in this story?

Discuss.

WORD SEARCH

Find the following words below:

Hester Prynne, Chillingworth, Dimmesdale, Pearl, scaffold, witch,
Mistress Hibbins, adultery, Puritan, punishment, magistrate, Hawthorne,
Boston, goodwife, novel, physician, Hawthorne, Bellingham, guilt, Old
Scratch, shame, Barter Theatre

M Z O I Y T R N B E J P C C T
E I E L L R A L T T H G B H N
F V S I D T E A M Y A A H I E
I E U T I S R T S U R R A L M
W G L R R T C I L T U W W L H
D P U A S E C R E U I R T I S
O P E I D I S R A T D E H N I
O I G A A S T S C T L A O G N
G A P N R H E H H M C D R W U
M Y D T E L U M T I Q H N O P
V G P A L Q K P M L B O E R E
E G T B O S T O N I E B C T M
E R D L O F F A C S D V I H A
E N N Y R P R E T S E H O N H
B E L L I N G H A M B P H N S

True and False

Write **T** if the statement is **True** and **F** if the statement is **False**.

1. ____ The story is set in a time period about 150 years ago.
2. ____ Boston is still a very small town in Massachusetts.
3. ____ The Puritans were members of a very strict religious group.
4. ____ Reverend Dimmesdale feels that Hester should be hung for her crime.
5. ____ After Hester stepped onto the scaffold, no one could see her.
6. ____ Roger Chillingworth had been shipwrecked and captured by Indians.
7. ____ Hester was very much in love with her husband.
8. ____ Pearl is a well-behaved child.
9. ____ Old Scratch is the Puritan version of Santa Claus.
10. ____ Hester Prynne is Nathaniel Hawthorne's sister.
11. ____ Roger Chillingworth stands with Hester and Pearl on the scaffold at night.
12. ____ Dimmesdale is afraid of Chillingworth.
13. ____ Mistress Hibbins is considered by some to be a witch.
14. ____ Hester and Dimmesdale decide to sail to Amsterdam.
15. ____ Dimmesdale dies upon the scaffold.

Matching

Match the person in the first column with the corresponding description in the second.

- | | |
|------------------------|--|
| 1. Roger Chillingworth | a. Hester's daughter |
| 2. Arthur Dimmesdale | b. Hester's husband |
| 3. Bellingham | c. The town witch |
| 4. Pearl | d. The author of <i>The Scarlet Letter</i> |
| 5. Mistress Hibbins | e. A woman accused of adultery |
| 6. Hester Prynne | f. A local minister |
| 7. Nathaniel Hawthorne | g. The Governor of the colony of Massachusetts |

Suggested Further Reading

Other novels by Nathaniel Hawthorne include:

The House of Seven Gables,

The Blithedale Romance,

The Marble Faun

Fanshawe

Doctor Grimshawe's Secret

To find out more about Nathaniel Hawthorne, his life and his works go to this link:

<http://www.online-literature.com/hawthorne/>