

"I hope I could be as strong as Hester if everyone thought I was wrong for doing what I truly believed in." Michael, 13



THE SCARLET LETTER

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

Hester Prynne stands defiantly on a scaffold before hostile Puritans in seventeenth-century Boston, Massachusetts.

The baby in her arms and the bright scarlet letter 'A' on her gown are evidence and punishment for the shame she has brought on her religious neighbours.

Will Hester continue to conceal the name of the husband who sent her away from Europe years before as well as that of the father of her baby? Will the husband get his revenge on the man who has shamed him? Will that man admit his past, and join Hester and her daughter Pearl?

Or is the matter out of their hands, waiting to be decided between the forces of the Lord and of Satan?



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CONTENTS

The characters	4
The Scarlet Letter	7
Taking things further	55



THE CHARACTERS

Hester Prynne

Hester is a proud young mother, considered a sinner and criminal by her New England neighbours. Will she find – or even seek – forgiveness?



Roger Chillingworth

This ageing English scholar and doctor arrives in Boston to trace his own past. What will he discover, and what will he do when he finds it?



Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale

Dimmesdale is a respected preacher, an excellent speaker, and pillar of the community in Boston. But will his neighbours ever learn about the secret that burns within his heart?



Pearl

The people of Boston consider Hester's daughter to be wild and untamed. Are they being unfair, or will she grow up to be a witch or an outcast?



John Wilson

Wilson is a stern, respected clergyman and a colleague of Reverend Dimmesdale. Will he convince Hester to confess her 'crime' publicly?



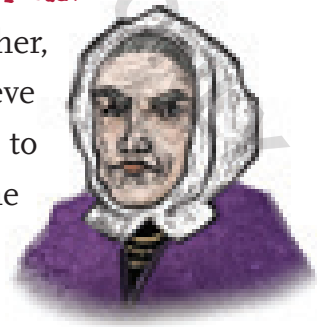
Governor Bellingham

The Governor of the Massachusetts colony meets Hester at two important times in her life. Is his political power any more merciful than the religious judgments of Boston's Puritans?



Mistress Hibbins

Widow Hibbins lives with her brother, Governor Bellingham. People believe she is a witch, and she does little to make them believe otherwise. Will she persuade Hester to turn her back on the Puritans and their harsh religion?





THE SCARLET LETTER

My position as surveyor, or administrator, of the Custom-House of Salem, Massachusetts, sounds impressive. But in truth our port no longer sees enough commerce to warrant such a post. The present year, 1849, can hardly compete in shipping trade with that of 1749 or even 1649. At times I find myself as idle as the old men who have worked here, with no urgency, for decades.

One rainy afternoon even I found it hard to occupy myself fruitfully. Exploring the empty, cobweb-strewn floor above me, I found a parcel. It belonged to a certain Jonathan Pue, like me the Surveyor, but in his case in the service of His Majesty's Customs. I was looking eighty years into the past as I opened the parcels, but Mr Pue had been looking back further, to events in Massachusetts in the seventeenth century.

The object that most drew my attention was a faded piece of fine red cloth. There were traces on it of gold embroidery, although greatly frayed. This scarlet cloth was shaped like a capital letter A. I absent-mindedly placed it on my breast and experienced a sensation of burning heat, as if the letter were not of red cloth but of red-hot iron. I shuddered, and let it fall upon the floor.

It was then that I noticed a faded manuscript describing the events surrounding the curious scarlet letter. Pue's story centred on a Salem woman named Hester Prynne. I was astounded by her remarkable story, and resolved to retell it for modern, nineteenth-century readers, as a tale. And that tale unfolds in the pages that follow.



The throng of bearded men in sad-coloured garments and grey, steeple-crowned hats, intermixed with women, some wearing hoods,



others bare-headed, waited in front of the wooden prison building. Its heavily timbered oak door was studded with spikes.

A modern, nineteenth-century observer would assume that a hardened criminal – perhaps even a murderer – was to be led through that grim portal. But the atmosphere was harsher two centuries ago, in the first decades of the Puritan city of Boston. The prisoner might well have been a drunkard or even a disobedient child.

- At the end of the story, when Hester has returned to live alone, we learn that letters and parcels arrive from distant lands. They display aristocratic crests, so we conclude that Pearl has married a foreign nobleman, yet still remembers her mother.

Back in time

Although the narrator of *The Scarlet Letter* begins with a description of his own life in the mid-nineteenth century, the story itself is set two centuries earlier. Hester, Pearl, Mr Dimmesdale and all of the other characters live in Boston, the capital of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

The colony was founded by English settlers in the early seventeenth century. Most of the settlers were deeply religious Puritans, who had wanted to ‘purify’ the Church of England of what they saw as beliefs and practices that were not specifically mentioned in the *Bible*. England’s religious and political leaders resisted such changes, so many Puritans moved to more

sympathetic cities in Europe such as Amsterdam and Geneva. Others crossed the Atlantic.

Once in the New World, the Puritans were free to practise their religion, although they did not tolerate those with different beliefs. Their colony kept its political links with England, but could elect its own governors. Using real people such as Governor John Winthrop and Richard Bellingham as characters makes *The Scarlet Letter* more believable as an account of seventeenth-century Massachusetts.

Nathaniel Hawthorne was well qualified to write about that period in the history of Massachusetts. One of his ancestors, John Hathorne, was a judge during the Salem Witch Trials of 1692–3. Scores of people around Salem were accused of being witches, and twenty of them were executed.

The idea of witchcraft, and of Satan waiting to tempt or destroy decent Christians, is an important feature of *The Scarlet Letter*. Like so much else in Hawthorne’s account, it is a true reflection of life in colonial Massachusetts.