

Great Books: *The Scarlet Letter*: Teacher's Guide

Grade Level: 9-12

Curriculum Focus: Literature

Lesson Duration: One class periods

Program Description

Written in the 19th century, *The Scarlet Letter* tells the story of Hester Prynne, who was branded with a large, red "A" because she had an adulterous relationship with a young minister. The novel explores questions still asked today: What is moral? And what is good.

I Introduction (14 min.)

II. Puritan Society (15 min.)

III. A Guilty Conscience (12 min.)

IV. Final Redemption (11 min.)

Lesson Plan

Student Objectives

- Discover that the ending of a novel does not resolve all questions that may occur to readers.
- Imagine characters living out their lives beyond the novel's ending.

Materials

- *Great Books: The Scarlet Letter* video and VCR, or DVD and DVD player
- *The Scarlet Letter*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Procedures

1. Point out to your students that very little information about Pearl is shared at the end of *The Scarlet Letter*. All we learn is that Roger Chillingworth leaves Pearl a great inheritance, making her "the richest heiress of her day, in the New World." Then Pearl leaves town, never to return. According to the novel, "None knew – nor ever learned, with the fullness of perfect certainty – whether the elf-child had gone thus untimely to a maiden grave, or whether her wild, rich nature had been softened and subdued, and made capable of a woman's gentle happiness." In this project, your students will use hints in the novel, their notions of romance and tragedy, and their knowledge of human behavior to propose a logical resolution to the question "What happens to Pearl?"

2. Establish what your students know from the novel about Pearl as a child. Ask them to describe Pearl based on how the author presented this character. Ask the following questions:
 - What does Pearl's appearance tell readers?
 - What do we learn about Pearl from how she talks and acts?
 - What do we learn about Pearl from what other people (including the author) say or suggest about her?
3. Having established some sense of Pearl, ask your students to discuss the following questions that relate to her life beyond the end of the novel:
 - How might Pearl's childhood experiences affect her emotions and her activities once she leaves New England?
 - What life skills will Pearl have to learn as a young woman?
 - Under what conditions might Pearl marry or have a child?
 - How likely is it that Pearl might take out her anger on people in her new community? What antisocial actions might she take?
 - How likely is it that Pearl would grow beyond her anger? How would Pearl display normality?
 - If Pearl survives, how much communication do you think she will have with her mother?
 - What role could Pearl play in another community? Might she be a witch, a religious leader who dispenses mercy and punishment, or a recluse?
 - If Pearl survives and has a child, what do you think she will tell the child about Hester, Dimmesdale, or Chillingworth? What will she say about her own childhood?
4. After the class discussion, give students the following options for writing their ideas.
 - Write a short story with Pearl, age 18, as the main character.
 - Write a letter from Pearl, age 18, to her mother.
 - Write a scene between Pearl, age 18, and her mother, whom she goes to visit.
 - Write a doctor's report on the cause of Pearl's death at age 18.
5. Let each student share the written product with the class. Ask for comments on the credibility and authenticity of Pearl's portrayal in each piece.
6. Discuss the following: We may not be certain of an author's motives, but we can judge how an author's decision affects us as readers. How do you feel about how the novel ends in relation to Pearl? Explain your reasons.

Assessment

Use the following three-point rubric to evaluate students' work during this lesson.

- **3 points:** Students actively participated in class discussions; created a credible and authentic extension of the novel; wrote smooth prose or a natural-sounding first-person voice; made no errors in grammar, usage, or mechanics.
- **2 points:** Students somewhat participated in class discussions; created a credible and authentic extension of the novel; wrote mostly smooth and natural-sounding prose; and had some errors in grammar, usage, or mechanics.
- **1 point:** Students did not participate in class discussions; did not produce a credible and authentic extension of the novel or did not make a sincere effort to do so; wrote insufficiently smooth or unnatural-sounding prose; and made many errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics.

Vocabulary

hypocrisy

Definition: A feigning to be what one is not or to believe what one does not, especially the false assumption of an appearance of virtue or religion

Context: *The Scarlet Letter* is a slow, tortuous dance of guilt, hypocrisy, and vengeance that ends in tragedy.

illegitimate

Definition: Not recognized as lawful offspring; born of parents not married to each other

Context: Pearl, Hester's illegitimate child, grows into a lively and perceptive child.

imp

Definition: A small demon; a mischievous child

Context: Throughout the novel, Pearl is portrayed as sort of an imp who behaves rather badly.

retribution

Definition: Something given or exacted in recompense; punishment

Context: It was meant for retribution, too, a torture to be felt, a constant reminder in the midst of a troubled joy.

scaffold

Definition: A platform on which a criminal is executed or punished

Context: After Hester's appearance on the scaffold, she and Pearl are taken to prison.

Academic Standards

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)

McREL's Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K-12 Education addresses 14 content areas. To view the standards and benchmarks, visit link:

<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>

This lesson plan addresses the following national standards:

- Language Arts – Writing: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process, Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing, Uses grammatical and mechanical conventions in written compositions, Gathers and uses information for research purposes; Reading: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of literary texts

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Reading Association have developed national standards to provide guidelines for teaching the English language arts. To view the standards online, go to <http://www.ncte.org/about/over/standards/110846.htm>

This lesson plan addresses the following NCTE standards:

- Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
- Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, and vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
- Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
- Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.

Support Materials

Develop custom worksheets, educational puzzles, online quizzes, and more with the free teaching tools offered on the [Discoveryschool.com](http://www.discoveryschool.com) Web site. Create and print support materials, or save them to a Custom Classroom account for future use. To learn more, visit

- <http://school.discovery.com/teachingtools/teachingtools.html>



DVD Content

This program is available in an interactive DVD format. The following information and activities are specific to the DVD version.

How To Use the DVD

The DVD starting screen has the following options:

Play Video— This plays the video from start to finish. There are no programmed stops, except by using a remote control. With a computer, depending on the particular software player, a pause button is included with the other video controls.

Video Index— Here the video is divided into four parts (see below), indicated by video thumbnail icons. Watching all parts in sequence is similar to watching the video from start to finish. Brief descriptions and total running times are noted for each part. To play a particular segment, press Enter on the remote for TV playback; on a computer, click once to highlight a thumbnail and read the accompanying text description and click again to start the video.

Curriculum Units— These are specially edited video segments pulled from different sections of the video (see below). These nonlinear segments align with key ideas in the unit of instruction. They include onscreen pre- and post-viewing questions, reproduced below in this Teacher's Guide. Total running times for these segments are noted. To play a particular segment, press Enter on the TV remote or click once on the Curriculum Unit title on a computer.

Standards Link— Selecting this option displays a single screen that lists the national academic standards the video addresses.

Teacher Resources— This screen gives the technical support number and Web site address.

Video Index

I. Introduction (14 min.)

An overview of the story told in *The Scarlet Letter* and the moral and social issues it addressed and an introduction to author Nathaniel Hawthorne.

II. Puritan Society (15 min.)

A look at 17th-century Puritan society and a discussion of Hester Prynne and her daughter, Pearl, and what Hawthorne intended to reveal through their characters.

III. A Guilty Conscience (12 min.)

As the plot of *The Scarlet Letter* unfolds, Arthur Dimmesdale deteriorates and Hester attempts to save him. A look at the characters of Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth and Puritan society's fear of witchcraft.



IV. Final Redemption (11 min.)

Hester and Dimmesdale reunite but are unable to break free of their sins. Critics and scholars discuss the ending to *The Scarlet Letter* and the book's lasting legacy.

Curriculum Units

1. Introduction: *The Scarlet Letter*

Pre-viewing question

Q: What does it mean to be a conscientious objector?

A: A conscientious objector has come to mean a person who refuses to serve in the military or participate in warfare due to religious or moral reasons. People have defined Hester Prynne as an early conscientious objector because by her actions she refuses to partake in a Puritanical society.

Post-viewing question

Q: In what ways do you see the themes of *The Scarlet Letter* being applied today?

A: Answers will vary.

2. An Adulteress' Tale

Pre-viewing question

Q: Do you think Hester received a fitting punishment for her adultery?

A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question

Q: In what ways does Hester come to embody the Puritan ideals for a woman?

A: Hester becomes a humble nurse for sick townsfolk. She spends her time embroidering clothing and refuses to join the witches' circle, instead choosing to set a good example for her daughter. She forgives Dimmesdale for not standing by her when she is punished for their affair.

3. A Family Reunited

Pre-viewing question

Q: Why do you think Hester chose not to reveal the name of Pearl's father?

A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question

Q: How does Dimmesdale's shame affect his power as a preacher?

A: The more his shame overwhelms him and the more Dimmesdale longs for redemption, the more powerful and fiery his preaching becomes. His torment is interpreted as passion for God and his parishioners admire him even more because they have no notion of what is truly driving him.

4. Escaping the Letter

Pre-viewing question

Q: Do you think Dimmesdale is an honorable man or a hypocrite?

A: Answers will vary.



Post-viewing question

Q: Why do you think Hester returns to the village and wears her scarlet letter until the end of her life? Do you think the book should have ended differently?

A: Answers will vary.

5. Puritan Society

Pre-viewing question

Q: Why was Hester Prynne a threat to the Puritans?

A: She broke their laws and went against the uniform beliefs of their society.

Post-viewing question

Q: Why did the Puritans settle in America?

A: The Puritans were not looking for religious freedom, as is commonly thought. Rather they were looking for a place where they could set up a godly society, one that existed according to their laws and religious regulations.

6. A Victorian Author

Pre-viewing question

Q: Why do you think *The Scarlet Letter* sold so few copies during Hawthorne's lifetime despite having earned literary praise?

A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question

Q: What were some of the common Victorian literary symbols used in *The Scarlet Letter*?

A: Possible answers: The forest represented freedom during the day, and at night it represented evil. The prison and cemetery represent oppression and sorrow.