The Scarlet Letter

Before Reading

BEFORE READING ACTIVITIES (PAGE 76)

ACTIVITY 1 BEFORE READING
Encourage sensitive discussion of the issues involved. The Puritans would probably agree with numbers 1, 5, 7, and possibly 4.

ACTIVITY 2 BEFORE READING
Encourage students to speculate and to make guesses, but do not tell them the answers. They will find out as they read that the answers are:
Hester: 1, 3, 5, 6, 7
Hester’s child: 7
Hester’s lover: 2, 5, 8
Hester’s husband: 1

While Reading

CHAPTERS 1 AND 2 WHILE READING
1 What . . . ? A piece of red material in the shape of the letter A, with patterns of gold thread.
2 What . . . ? They thought that the magistrates should burn the letter A into her forehead with hot metal, or that she should die.
3 Who . . . ? They could send criminals there to die, or people who had done wrong to stand in shame before the eyes of the world.
4 What . . . ? She had to stand on the scaffold for three hours, and wear the scarlet A for adultery for the rest of her life.
5 Who . . . ? Hester’s husband.
6 What . . . ? The name of the father of her child.
7 Who . . . ? The man called Roger Chillingworth, who Hester had seen in the crowd earlier.
8 What . . . ? She was afraid he would kill them both with poison.
9 Who . . . ? The man who had wronged both him and Hester – the father of Hester’s child.
10 What . . . ? Nothing – he just wanted to watch him tremble.
11 What . . . ? He asked her not to tell anyone that he was her husband.

BEFORE READING CHAPTER 3
Encourage students to speculate and to make guesses, but do not tell them the answers. They will find out as they read that the only ‘yes’ answer is number 2.

CHAPTERS 3 TO 5 WHILE READING
1 F People gave Hester a lot of work because her needlework was so good.
2 F People wanted to take Pearl away from Hester because they thought it would be better for the child to grow up in a more godly home than Hester’s.
3 T
4 T
5 F Arthur Dimmesdale never talked about the sickness of his soul, although Chillingworth often tried to make him.
6 F When Arthur told people that he was a hateful sinner, they did not believe him and said he was a strong and godly man.
7 F When Arthur saw Hester and Pearl, he asked them to come up and stand with him on the scaffold.
8 T

BEFORE READING CHAPTER 6
Encourage students to discuss which course of action Hester should follow and to explain why they think this, but do not give the answers. In fact, she does numbers 3 and 5, and plans to do number 4.

CHAPTERS 6 TO 8 WHILE READING
1+12 Hester had the respect of many people now because she worked hard and lived a godly life.
2+15 Roger had changed from a kind person into an evil one after he had spent seven years getting a cruel revenge.
3+9 Hester wanted Roger to forgive her and Arthur and become a wise, kind man again but Roger thought it was too late for that now.
4+11 Arthur thought life was easier for Hester because everyone knew about her sin.
5+16 Hester advised Arthur to leave Boston so that he could begin a happy life somewhere else.
6+13 Arthur was worried about getting to know Pearl because children did not usually like him.
7+10 Pearl did not want to go to her mother until she had put the scarlet letter back on her bosom.
8+14 Hester and Arthur decided to return to England since there they could live a quiet life more easily.
BEFORE READING CHAPTERS 9 AND 10
Encourage speculation and discussion, but do not tell students the answers. They will find out as they read that on Election Day nobody leaves Boston; Arthur tells everyone he is Pearl’s father; nobody kills Roger; Hester, Arthur, and Pearl stand on the scaffold together; and Arthur dies.

After Reading

ACTIVITY 1 AFTER READING
Students may complete this conversation how they like. Possible responses for Hester might be:
Pearl: Mother, why didn’t your husband come with you to Boston?
Hester: He had some business to finish in Amsterdam before he could leave, so he sent me ahead of him.
Pearl: And how did you get to know my father?
Hester: He was my priest at church, so I saw him nearly every day.
Pearl: But how could you fall in love with him? You already had a husband, so it was a sin of breaking God’s law.
Hester: Love doesn’t follow any laws, I’m afraid, Pearl. He was gentle and kind, and I was lonely. I had never felt any love for my husband, and I hadn’t seen him for two years. I thought he was dead, drowned at sea.
Pearl: Two years! That’s a long time. And when he suddenly appeared again, how did you feel?
Hester: I was very afraid. I had wronged him greatly, and I didn’t know what he would do to me, or you, or your father.
Pearl: But why didn’t he accuse my father in public?
Hester: Because he wanted a slow, secret revenge. He wanted to stay close to him, and watch the guilt slowly destroy your father’s soul.
Pearl: How horrible! Why didn’t you tell me all this before, when my father was alive?

ACTIVITY 2 AFTER READING
Open answers. Encourage discussion.

ACTIVITY 3 AFTER READING
Encourage students to suggest interpretations and discuss them. Here are some possible ideas:
1 This is the first sign we see of Arthur’s weakness compared to Hester’s strength. Arthur’s words suggest that he longs to make his guilt public, but he is too afraid to do so, and hopes that Hester will do this for him. Arthur sees Hester’s public shame as a good thing, which allows her to face what she has done wrong in a way that is impossible for him. His last few words might also be a secretly apologetic message to Hester herself.
2 This shows how strong Hester is, and also how proud. She will not ask for or accept anyone’s help, and feels that her guilt is a matter between her and God, and no one else. When the time is right, she will be free of the scarlet letter, but that is not for anybody else to judge.
3 Roger’s words suggest that he feels that they are all trapped in their fate, and that nothing they do will change it. They also suggest that he is now convinced that the whole situation is Hester’s fault. This is in contrast with his earlier words, when he said to Hester, ‘How could I have imagined that you would ever love me?’ Then he seemed to think he might be in some way partly responsible for what has happened, but he no longer thinks this.
4 Arthur shows himself here to be a more forgiving person than Roger. He has forgiven Hester for anything she has done wrong, but Roger has made Hester’s sin the reason for a cruel revenge which has had an evil effect on all their lives. Arthur knows that there must be love in the world as well as justice and punishment for wrongdoing.
5 Pearl shows here the strong intuitive understanding of a child, who can recognize feelings but not necessarily explain them. She knows that Arthur has taken pleasure in the company of Pearl and her mother in secret, but that he is too afraid to stand up with them in public. Her words hint at disapproval of the double standards that she can feel at work here, but there is also a trace of pity as she seems to sense the pain and confusion that Arthur suffers from.

ACTIVITY 4 AFTER READING
Students might want to put some words under more than one heading (some suggestions given below).
Encourage students to discuss their choices.
Feelings: joy, misery, passion, respect, shame
The law: guilty, innocent, magistrate, mercy, prison, punishment (possibly: revenge)
Religion: godly, heaven, priest, Puritan, sermon, sin, soul (possibly: joy, passion, innocent)
Sewing: cloth, material, needle, pattern, thread
The odd man out might be: revenge

ACTIVITY 5 AFTER READING
4 +9+12 14+2+5 1+10 13+7+16 6+3 8+15+11
Yes, I was there, quite close to Mr Dimmesdale when he stopped next to the scaffold and called out to Mistress Prynne and her little girl. The old doctor hurried up to him and caught his arm, but he pushed the doctor away and climbed up onto the scaffold with Mistress Prynne and the child. He stood there in front of the crowd and cried out that he was as great a sinner as Hester Prynne. Finally, he pulled open his shirt for us to see the great, scarlet letter ‘A’ on his
chest, which means, of course, that he is the father of Hester Prynne’s child! However, the poor child did not have a father for very long, because almost at once the priest fell to the ground. After little Pearl had kissed him, he thanked God for his mercy, and then he died in Mistress Prynne’s arms.

**ACTIVITY 6 AFTER READING**

Students can write these new endings in any way they wish. The following passages are possible examples:

- Arthur confessed on the scaffold in front of the people of Boston. The Governor decided that he would show mercy to Arthur, who was obviously very ill, and he allowed Arthur to leave for England on the ship with Hester and Pearl. Back in England, Arthur slowly got better, and he, Hester and Pearl lived happily together for many years. Roger left Boston, a broken man, and was never seen again.

- Arthur did not confess. When Roger stood up to tell people that he was Hester’s husband, nobody believed him, and when he said that Arthur was the father of Hester’s child, they thought that he must be crazy. The Governor suggested to Arthur that it would be a good idea if he left Boston for a while, so Arthur, Hester and Pearl quietly left for Virginia, where they spent the rest of their lives together happily. Roger was never the same afterwards, and died after a short illness.

- Arthur did not confess, but Roger told Arthur’s secret to the Governor. Because of his health, and because he was a priest, Arthur was sent to prison, where he spent many years helping others and doing good works. Hester and Pearl went on living in Boston and visited Arthur often in prison.

- Arthur confessed to his crime and was sent to prison. At the same time Hester was sent back to live with her husband Roger. They were not happy together, and after a short time Hester died mysteriously. Some said that it was Roger’s medicines that killed her. Pearl became a rich woman with Roger’s money, and married well.

**ACTIVITY 7 AFTER READING**

Open answers. Encourage discussion.