Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

The Scarlet Letter

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Plot

- Boston in the 1640s, a strict Puritan colony. Hester Prynne has a baby, Pearl, while her husband is missing, presumed lost at sea. She is made to stand on the **scaffold** and to wear a scarlet letter A, for **adultery**, on her dress. She refuses to name Pearl's father.
- Her husband arrives, calling himself Roger Chillingworth, and makes Hester promise to keep his identity secret. He suspects the young, much-loved minister Arthur Dimmesdale and torments him by pretending to be his doctor and friend.
- Dimmesdale, the real father, is eaten up by guilt and becomes ill. Hester lives quietly, sewing beautiful embroidery and helping the sick and poor, and some people come to see the A as meaning "Able".
- In the forest, Hester and Dimmesdale plan to escape to Europe. Instead, after his Election Day sermon, Dimmesdale stands on the **scaffold** with Hester and Pearl, confesses, and dies. Chillingworth dies soon after, leaving his money to Pearl. Years later Hester returns to Boston, and is buried near Dimmesdale.

Characters

- Hester: strong, proud and independent; she turns her punishment into a sign of her own strength.
- Dimmesdale: respected and eloquent, but weak and hypocritical, hiding his sin while suffering for it.
- Chillingworth: once a scholar, he is twisted by revenge into something almost devilish.
- Pearl: wild, clever and strange; she is both Hester's punishment and her treasure, and keeps asking about the letter.

Themes and context

- Sin, guilt and secrecy; **hypocrisy**; punishment and forgiveness; identity; and the conflict between nature (the forest) and a strict society (the town).
- Nathaniel Hawthorne published the novel in 1850. He set it two centuries earlier among the **Puritans**, whose harsh religious laws punished sin in public. One of his ancestors had been a judge in the Salem witch trials.

Form and symbols

- The scarlet letter itself changes meaning through the novel. The **scaffold** scenes, at the start, middle and end, mark the turning points.
- The forest stands for freedom and nature, the town for rules and judgement. Light and dark imagery runs through the book.
- The novel opens with The Custom-House, an introduction in which the narrator claims to have found the letter and Hester's story.

Key terms

Puritans	Strict Protestant Christians who settled in New England in the 1600s.
Adultery	Having a sexual relationship outside marriage.
Hypocrisy	Pretending to be better than you are.
Symbol	An object that stands for an idea, like the scarlet letter.
Scaffold	The raised platform where people were publicly punished.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. Where is The Scarlet Letter set?
2. What does the scarlet A first stand for?
3. Who is Pearl's father?
4. Who is Roger Chillingworth really?
5. How does Chillingworth torment Dimmesdale?
6. What do some townspeople later say the A means?
7. Where do Hester and Dimmesdale plan their escape?
8. What does Dimmesdale do after his Election Day sermon?

Answers

1. Puritan Boston in the 1640s
2. Adultery
3. Arthur Dimmesdale
4. Hester's husband
5. By pretending to be his doctor and friend

Your notes

6. Able
7. In the forest
8. Confesses on the scaffold and dies

What to do next

Practise 10 questions on this topic

Try 3 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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