



The Scarlet Letter

Nathaniel Hawthorne

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The best known of Hawthorne's works, *The Scarlet Letter* presents a sad tale of love and betrayal set within the context of seventeenth-century Puritan New England. The values and mores of the Puritan settlement influence the social as well as the gender expectations of the narrative, but Hawthorne through his narrator looks back upon this world with a nineteenth-century sensibility that affects the development of the characters. Within the novel, the individual minor characters and the community as a whole articulate the strict code by which individuals are expected to live and by which they are judged when they engage in wrongdoing. For the seventeenth-century world that Hawthorne recreates, emphasis is placed upon the struggle between righteousness and sin. Hawthorne explores how this emphasis contributes to individual failings rooted in self-righteousness and self-justification. The act that precipitates the unfolding of the narrative occurs prior to the opening scene. Hester Prynne, a young wife whose husband remains absent from the settlement, violates her marriage vows by engaging in a sexual relationship with the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, a minister who seeks to establish his place among the Puritan divines of New England. Jailed for her crime when her pregnancy becomes known, Hester is judged guilty of adultery. The novel opens as Hester is brought forth upon the scaffold to face public condemnation for her sin. While Hester stands upon the scaffold holding her newborn daughter Pearl, she sees her husband, who now goes by the name of Roger Chillingworth, standing at the edges of the crowd. She also sees her lover, Arthur Dimmesdale, standing in the company of Puritan ministers and officials. A brave and strong-willed woman, Hester refuses to betray her lover, but realizes from her perspective on the scaffold that she must face her trials alone, that neither of the men who has affected her life will openly be a part of her future. These four characters become entangled in a web of concealment, deceit, and revenge, a web that can only be broken by honesty, confession and forgiveness.

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