

# CliffsNotes.com® Conversation Starters for **THE SCARLET LETTER**

Hawthorne called *The Scarlet Letter* a “psychological romance,” a new genre of fiction at the time. What do you think the term “psychological romance” means? Is there anything romantic in the novel? If so, what? How is this romance evident?

---

Hawthorne had deep bonds with his Puritan ancestors and created a story that highlights both their weaknesses and their strengths. Within the context of the novel, what are some of the weaknesses of Puritanism? What are some of its strengths?

---

*The Scarlet Letter* includes the real and the unreal, the actual and the imaginary, the probable and the improbable. What are examples of things that are unreal, imaginary, and improbable in the novel? Do these detract from the novel or add to the novel? How so?

---

Most readers think that The Custom House preface isn't needed as part of the novel. Is it or not? Hawthorne included it for a reason, but what is that reason? What role does it serve as part of the novel overall?

---

How does the setting in Chapter 1 set the mood for the story? What is the setting in Chapter 1? What are some of the specific things in Chapter 1 that help set the mood?

---

Chapter 1 includes reference to the wild rosebush that grows outside of the prison door. The wild rosebush is a strong image developed by Hawthorne. What does the wild rosebush symbolize? What does the plot of weeds growing so profusely outside the prison symbolize?

---

In Chapter 2, Hester emerges from the prison wearing a scarlet “A.” What does the “A” look like? Why is what it looks like important to the novel overall? How does Hester compare to the crowd awaiting her appearance from prison?

---

In Chapter 2, we first see Pearl, Hester's daughter. What is Pearl a symbol of? What are some themes in the novel associated with Pearl?

---

The smugly pious attitude of the women assembled in front of the prison who condemn Hester in Chapter 2 are a symbol of what? What else in this chapter shows Hawthorne's deep disdain for society back then?

---

In Chapter 3, Roger Chillingworth is first physically introduced although we don't learn his name until the next chapter. Hawthorne's portrayal of Chillingworth emphasizes his physical deformity. How does Hawthorne use Chillingworth's physicality to mirror his role in the novel?

---

# CliffsNotes.com® Conversation Starters for **THE SCARLET LETTER**

In Chapter 3, how does Dimmesdale's one-paragraph speech to Hester reveal more about his character than any description of his physical body and nervous habits does?

---

How do Chillingworth's and Dimmedale's names mirror their characters' outlook on life, their actions, and their roles in the novel, in this chapter and in later chapters?

---

How does Dimmesdale's speech to Hester in Chapter 3 reveal the dichotomy between his public speech and his personal meaning? What are examples of this dichotomy?

---

In Chapter 4, unlike in Chapter 3, Hawthorne does not summarize or discuss the actions of his characters, nor does he tell the readers what to think. Instead, he puts Hester and Chillingworth together and lets the reader learn about their attitudes and their relationship to each other through their dialogue. What are the attitudes of each? How would you characterize the relationship between them?

---

In Chapter 4, do you sympathize with Chillingworth? Why or why not? Does Hawthorne reveal any element of Chillingworth's future self-destruction in his grim determination to discover the man who has offended him?

---

In Chapter 4, why does Hester promise Chillingworth not to reveal his identification? What motivates her to make this promise?

---

What is the purpose of Chapter 5 within the novel overall? What are the major themes that Hawthorne focuses on in this chapter?

---

In Chapter 5, we learn that Hester's cottage is situated between the town and the wilderness. What is the significance of this? What does the town represent compared to the wilderness?

---

Chapter 6 develops Pearl as both a character and as a symbol? What is Pearl like emotionally? What is she a major symbol of? Should she be punished for her mother's actions? Why or why not?

---

In Chapter 7, Hester comes to Governor Bellingham's house because she has heard that people — particularly the governor — want to deprive her of Pearl. Why would Puritan society want to do this?

---

What is the relationship between Pearl and the scarlet "A" that Hester wears on her chest?

---

# CliffsNotes.com® Conversation Starters for **THE SCARLET LETTER**

Beginning in Chapter 9, when Chillingworth moves in with Dimmesdale, the townspeople see Chillingworth's negative impact on Dimmesdale but Dimmesdale cannot see this for himself. Why isn't Dimmesdale aware of this? What does this imply about Dimmesdale's character and the increasing guilt he feels about his past indiscretion with Hester?

---

Some readers note that within the context of the novel, the major characters — Hester, Pearl, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth — are more important as symbols than as real people. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? What is each main character a symbol of?

---

Chapter 12 is the novel's second scaffold scene and occurs exactly in the middle of the novel. How is this scaffold scene different than the first one? Who are the characters on the scaffold in this chapter compared to the earlier scaffold scene? More importantly, who is this scene's main focus compared to the earlier one, and what's the difference in perspective?

---

Hawthorne's writing is often described as Gothic. What in Chapter 12 supports that contention?

---

Chapter 13 is titled "Another View of Hester." What additional views of her do we get compared to what's come before? Why are these additional "views" important to developing her character and advancing the story?

---

How has Chillingworth changed over the last seven years as we see him in Chapter 14 compared to early in the novel? Does he have any redeeming values left? If so, what might they be? Are we as readers meant to see him as completely and totally evil?

---

How is Hester's view of Chillingworth in Chapter 14 different than her view of him in Chapter 15? In which chapter is she more sympathetic of him? More hateful of him?

---

Chapter 15 highlights just how lonely Hester is. How is this demonstrated in the chapter? In whom can Hester confide? Anyone?

---

In Chapter 16, Pearl asks Hester to tell her about the Black Man? Who or what is this Black Man? What does he symbolize?

---

Chapter 16 and the four chapters that follow it contain the longest section of continuous dramatic action in the novel. How would you summarize these five chapters? What are the major themes in them? The major symbols?

---

How does the forest in Chapter 16 reflect Hester's state of mind?

---

# CliffsNotes.com® Conversation Starters for **THE SCARLET LETTER**

How is Chapter 17 pivotal to the novel's plot? To Hester's and Dimmesdale's character development? Who is the stronger character? How so?

---

In Chapter 18, how does Hawthorne so closely tie Pearl and Nature? What are some examples that show this relationship? Is Pearl a symbol of Nature, or is Nature a symbol of Pearl? Or both?

---

Having removed the scarlet "A" and the formal cap that confined her hair in Chapter 18, in Chapter 19 Hester invites Pearl to meet Dimmesdale. How does Pearl now react to her mother? To Dimmesdale? What is the significance of Pearl's reactions to each?

---

What is the significance of Chapter 20's title, "The Minister in a Maze"? What is the maze? Is it a physical, spiritual, or psychological maze? How so?

---

In Chapter 21, Pearl does not understand why Dimmesdale cannot acknowledge her or her mother "here, in the sunny day." What is Hawthorne getting at by Pearl's saying this about Dimmesdale? What is symbolic of Dimmesdale's always having his hand over his heart?

---

At the beginning of Chapter 22, how does Hawthorne describe Puritan society? Who, especially, does he describe within Puritan society? Why does he interrupt his narrative at this point in the story to describe this group of people?

---

What role does Mistress Hibbins play in Chapter 22? What does Mistress Hibbins foreshadow?

---

Chapter 23 is the third and final scaffold scene. How does this scaffold scene compare to the previous two scaffold scenes? Who are the characters on the scaffold in this chapter compared to the earlier scaffold scenes? More importantly, who is this scene's main focus compared to the earlier ones, and what's the difference in perspective?

---

Before actually confessing in Chapter 23, Dimmesdale asks Hester, "Is this not better than what we dreamed of in the forest?" What does he mean by that? What act is he asking Hester to confirm?

---

By Dimmesdale confessing in Chapter 23, Chillingworth essentially loses his battle against Dimmesdale. How so? Do you agree or disagree with that statement?

---

In Chapter 24 "Conclusion," Hawthorne includes the following: "Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait by which the worst may be inferred." What moral to the story is Hawthorne suggesting with this quote? What other morals does he touch on in this final chapter?

---

# CliffsNotes.com® Conversation Starters for **THE SCARLET LETTER**

Hawthorne tells the reader that Hester eventually returns to Boston. Why does she return to there, the place of so much past agony for her?

---

When Hester dies, she is buried next to Dimmesdale. Their graves are slightly apart but with a single gravestone bearing the inscription, "On a field, sable, the letter A, gules." What does this inscription mean?

---