

Nathaniel Hawthorne

THE SCARLET LETTER

Set in 17th century Puritan Boston, this is the story of Hester Prynne and her illegitimate daughter Pearl. She's forced to wear a scarlet letter "A" as punishment for her relationship with another man, but she refuses to tell anyone the identity of Pearl's father and they live a lonely life in a small cottage. We meet many characters, including her husband Roger Chillingworth, the young priest Arthur Dimmesdale and Mistress Hibbins.

In this reader you will find:

- Information about Nathaniel Hawthorne's life
- A focus on Puritanism
- A focus on women in Puritan New England
- A focus on daily life in Puritan New England
- Glossary of difficult words
- Comprehension and grammar activities, including B2 style exercises
- Final test

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Classic - American English

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Nathaniel Hawthorne

THE SCARLET LETTER

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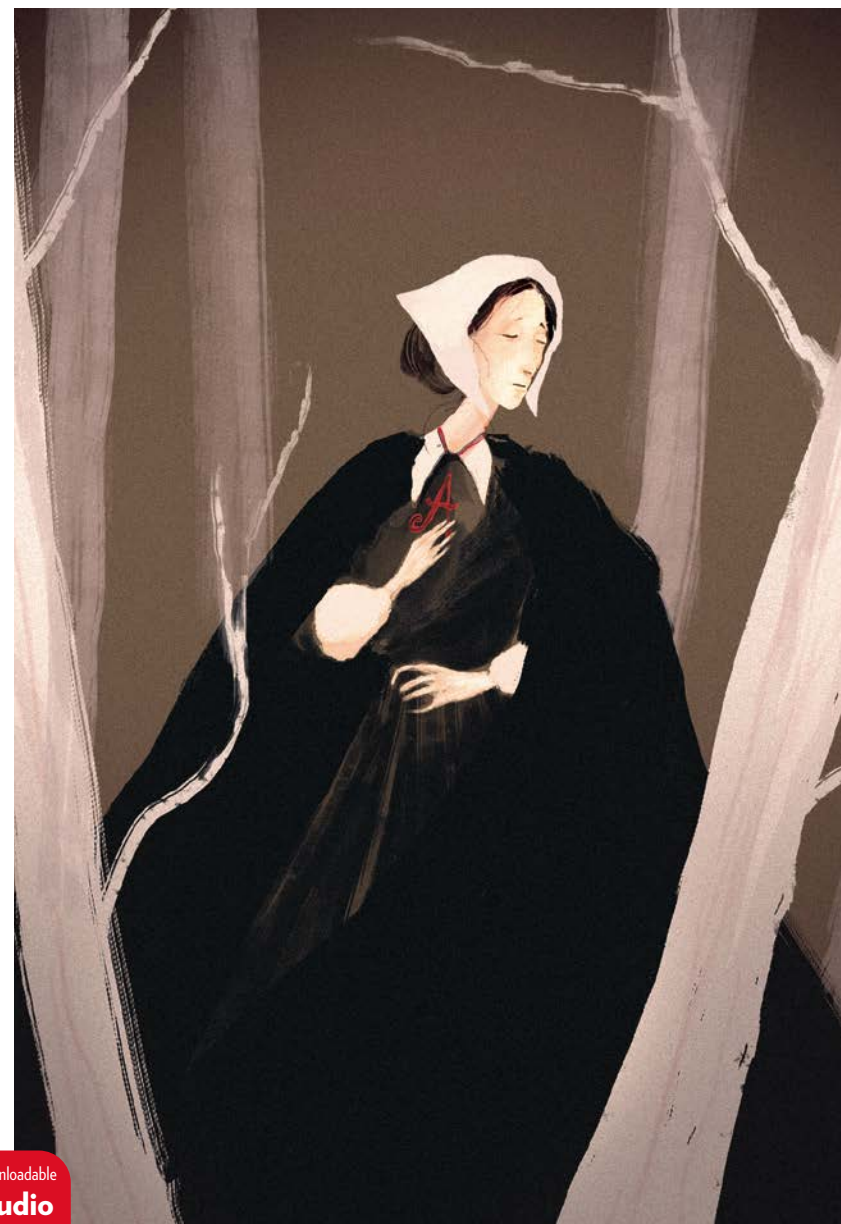
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Stage 4 B2

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THE SCARLET LETTER



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Book brief

- 1 *The Scarlet Letter* is a work of historical fiction written by American author Nathaniel Hawthorne and published in 1850.
- 2 The novel is set between 1642 and 1649 in Boston, part of the Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony, an English settlement on the east coast of America.
- 3 It tells the story of Hester Prynne who's publicly punished for having a baby by another man who isn't her husband.
- 4 The narrator writes about 200 years after the events he describes took place.
- 5 Main themes include sin, guilt, remorse and the nature of evil.

Nathaniel Hawthorne

The Scarlet Letter

Retold by
Claire Moore

Illustrated by
Riccardo Renzi

For Review Only

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Reverend John Wilson

The eldest churchman and Reverend Dimmesdale's brother, he's very hard towards those who don't follow the rules of the church and society.

Main Characters

Roger Chillingworth

Hester's husband, he's much older than his wife and is a cold and determined man out for revenge.

Governor Bellingham

A rich, elderly man who spends a lot of time discussing with the other town fathers. He judges others by their mistakes.

Hester Prynne

The protagonist of the story who has to wear the scarlet letter A for adulterer, because she has an affair with another man while waiting for her husband to arrive in America.

A young churchman, he's torn between his duties towards his church and his feelings of guilt and need to confess.

Arthur Dimmesdale

Mistress Hibbins

Her husband is dead so she lives with her brother Governor Bellingham. People say she's a witch who goes into the forest at night to ride with the 'Black Man.'

Pearl

Hester's daughter, she's very wise for her age. The townspeople say her father is the devil.

Before you Read

Vocabulary

1 Match the words or expressions to the correct definition.

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| 1 ☐ Puritans | a when someone has a love affair with another partner while still married |
| 2 ☐ colony | b an action considered to be against the laws of God and the church |
| 3 ☐ scaffold | c a group of people of one nationality who live in a foreign country |
| 4 ☐ adultery | d make someone feel ashamed in front of everybody |
| 5 ☐ forefather | e a raised, wooden platform once used to hang criminals |
| 6 ☐ sin | f a member of past generations of a particular movement |
| 7 ☐ shaming | g English Protestants who wanted a 'pure' Church of England without anything to do with Catholic practices |

Grammar B2 First

2 Read the text about the story and choose the correct answer (A, B, C or D) for each space.

The Scarlet Letter takes (1) in the seventeenth-century Puritan settlement of Boston in America. The story (2) with a young woman being led from the town prison to the town scaffold. Her name is Hester Prynne and she's carrying her baby daughter, Pearl. She's also (3) a scarlet letter "A" on her dress because she's being punished for adultery. The people in the crowd only know that Hester was (4) to America by her husband, a much older man, who apparently never (5) in Boston. Everyone believed he (6) been lost at sea. While in Boston, it is believed that Hester had an affair because she recently gave birth to a baby girl, but she won't tell anyone the identity of her lover. The scarlet letter is her public shaming for her actions against the laws of the church. One of the people in the crowd is Hester's husband. He wants revenge and (7) to be a doctor called Roger Chillingworth. Only Hester knows his true identity but he makes her promise to (8) it a secret.

- | | | | |
|--------------|-----------|------------|----------|
| 1 A part | B on | C place | D away |
| 2 A begins | B talks | C goes | D speaks |
| 3 A dressing | B tying | C wearing | D making |
| 4 A given | B sent | C held | D kept |
| 5 A arrived | B reached | C came | D went |
| 6 A was | B had | C is | D were |
| 7 A can | B does | C pretends | D has |
| 8 A tell | B get | C let | D keep |

Speaking

- 3 What do you know about life in 17th century America? Search on the Internet and discuss what you find out with a partner.

Listening B2 First

- 2 4 Choose the best answer A, B or C.

- 1 The story started
 - A ☐ in June in the afternoon.
 - B ☐ late one evening in July.
 - C ☐ early one morning in June.
- 2 The group of men
 - A ☐ were clean-shaven.
 - B ☐ were wearing hats.
 - C ☐ were tall.
- 3 A group of women
 - A ☐ were standing close to the men.
 - B ☐ were all wearing something to cover their hair.
 - C ☐ were speaking loudly to each other.
- 4 The Boston forefathers
 - A ☐ had used land on Cornhill as a cemetery.
 - B ☐ had built the prison over fifteen years ago.
 - C ☐ had made the cemetery long before building the prison.
- 5 The prison doors were
 - A ☐ covered in grass.
 - B ☐ next to a bush.
 - C ☐ new and shiny.
- 6 The roses
 - A ☐ were surrounded by weeds.
 - B ☐ were growing on the grass.
 - C ☐ were pink and beautiful.

The Sinner in the Market Place

- 2 On an early morning in June, a small group of men with beards and wearing dark clothes and tall hats stood in front of a wooden door with iron spikes*. There was a group of women near them too, some of them bareheaded and others with hoods over their heads. They whispered to each other as they stood in the morning light.

This tall hat was known as a capotain and was used by the Puritans from the late 1500s to the mid 1600s.

Between 1631 and 1680, despite many difficulties, the Puritans started creating the town of Boston with roads, houses, churches, schools and parks.

This was Boston and the forefathers of this colony had wisely* chosen a piece of new land for a cemetery and another for a prison. The Boston forefathers had built the first prison near Cornhill almost at the same time as they'd used Isaac Johnson's land for the cemetery.

By the time these people gathered at its doors some fifteen or twenty years later, the prison was already looking old and the ironwork on the door was rusty*. Had this place ever seemed new? The only distraction* from the ugly building was some grass in front of the door. Although overgrown with weeds*, right by the prison door was a beautiful wild rose bush covered with pretty pink roses. Kept alive over the years, it offered its beauty to the criminals who passed through the prison doors.

On that June morning, the colourful roses were in sharp contrast

spike a narrow, thin shape with a point at the end
wisely showing good judgement
rusty a reddish-brown colour that forms on iron

distraction when your attention is taken away from something
weed a wild plant growing where it isn't wanted

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to the gloomy*, dark clothes of the people gathered outside the prison waiting for the huge wooden doors to open. 

 3 So it was that on that early summer morning about two centuries ago, a group of Bostonians gathered together on the grass outside the jail* in Prison Lane, all staring at the large wooden door.

What were they waiting for? At that time in the history of New England, it was certainly something very serious or awful. Perhaps an execution*, the whipping* of a child, an Indian to be driven out* of town, or even a witch to be hanged at the gallows*.

Whatever the event was to be, the people gathered on the grass that morning were very serious. Here was a group of people who believed that religion and law were one and the same thing. They were cold and distant. What might be a slight offence today was considered very seriously at this time, even to be punished with death itself.

There were many women in the crowd that morning. These were strong, hard, bitter women, very different to their more elegant and delicate descendants. The morning sun shone on their strong bodies as they stood waiting for the prison door to open.

Then one of them, a hard-faced woman of about fifty, spoke, “Goodwives, I’ll tell you what I think. We should be deciding what to do about this woman, Hester Prynne. We’re good churchgoers and fully grown adults. If we’d judged Hester Prynne, I’m sure she’d have received a very different sentence than that of these great judges. Oh yes, I’m sure!”

Then another woman in the group spoke, “You know, I’ve heard that Reverend Master Dimmesdale, her godly pastor*, is very sad that

gloomy dark and unhappy

jail prison

execution killing

whip hit someone with a long thin piece of leather

drive out force someone away from a place

gallows a wooden frame used for hanging people

pastor priest



this scandal has happened among his congregation.”

A third woman continued, “These judges are certainly God-fearing gentlemen but I think they’re too forgiving and understanding. A brand* of hot iron on Hester Prynne’s forehead was the least they should have ordered. That would have made her wince*! But she’ll care very little about what they put on her dress, since she can easily cover it up with something and walk around as normal!”

Then a younger woman with a child spoke up, “Yes, but even if she covers it up, she’ll always feel the pain in her heart.”

The woman’s soft voice was suddenly quietened by another woman, probably the ugliest of the group, shouting, “Brands on her forehead, letters on her dress. Why are we talking about this? She should die for the shame she’s brought on us all! Is there no law at all?”

She was quickly interrupted by a man in the crowd, “Is there no mercy*, goodwife? Quiet now, you gossips! The prison door is opening and Mistress Prynne is coming out now!”

With this, the prison door opened and a black figure came out into the sunshine. It was the town-beadle, an officer of the town, carrying a sword and a staff* of office. With the staff in his left hand, he placed his right hand on a young woman’s shoulder, pushing her forward towards the prison door. At this point, however, she pushed him away from her and showing her strength of character she stepped into the sunlight. She was carrying a baby of about three months old, who blinked* and wriggled* at the bright sun, having only been used to the dark of the prison.

Standing before the crowd, Hester Prynne pulled her baby towards her, trying maybe to hide what was attached to her dress. After a

brand (here) a mark left on the skin after it’s burnt by something

wince feel pain or embarrassment

mercy forgiveness or pity shown towards someone you have the power to punish

staff a stick carried by an official

blink close and open your eyes again quickly

wriggle move by turning quickly



moment, however, realising perhaps that her baby couldn't hide the letter of shame, she put her baby on her arm and looked around at the townspeople gathered before her. The women in the crowd gasped* and whispered as they saw a large letter "A" attached to her dress. Made from bright red cloth and with a gold border around it, the letter was an artistic decoration to her dress that sharply contrasted with what was usually allowed by colony rules.

With long, dark, shiny hair and a perfect, tall figure, Hester Prynne had dark black eyes and a beautiful complexion*. With feminine dignity and a delicate gaze, those who knew her were shocked to see her calm composure* and beauty as she stood at the prison door. Everyone in the crowd that day, however, was staring at the Scarlet Letter "A". Almost as if it had magic powers, they stared at the letter attached to Hester's bosom*.

"Well, she's very good with her needle*," said one of the women in the crowd, 'but never before this brazen hussy* did a woman find such a way of showing how good she is with a needle! Is she laughing in the faces of the judges?"

"Quiet now, peace!" said the youngest among them "Don't let her hear you! I'm sure that letter is breaking her heart."

At that moment, the town-beadle banged his staff on the ground and shouted.

"Make way everyone! Make way in the King's name! Open a way, and I promise that Mistress Prynne and her clothing will be seen by every man, woman and child from now until an hour past midday. Come on, Madam Hester, and show your scarlet* letter to everyone in the market place!"

gasp catch your breath in surprise
complexion natural colour of the skin
composure in control of your emotions
bosom a woman's chest or breast

needle 
brazen hussy insulting description of a woman who likes to attract men
scarlet bright red color

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The crowd obediently opened a way, as Hester Prynne, led by a line of stern*-looking men and women, walked towards her place of punishment. A group of curious schoolboys, understanding very little about the situation, ran before her and turned around to laugh and stare into her face and at the scarlet letter. Although it was only a short distance from the prison door to the market place, every step felt much longer for Hester Prynne as she walked through the throng* of people. It was as if her heart had been flung* into the street for all to trample on*.

Seeming calm, however, Hester Prynne walked towards a scaffold situated in the market place. This place had great historical importance as it was where criminals used to be punished in public and had been an effective way of convincing the townspeople to be good citizens. For Hester Prynne, her sentence was to stand on the platform for a certain amount of time for everyone to see, but without suffering the rope around her neck.

As she stood on the scaffold for everyone to see, a beautiful woman with a baby at her bosom, a Roman Catholic among that crowd of Puritans might have been reminded of the image of the Madonna with the baby Jesus, so often painted by artists. Here, however, there was one big difference and that was the taint* of sin in the image.

Gathered on the balcony of the meeting house was the Governor and his advisors, a judge and the town pastors, all staring down at Hester Prynne and her baby. The crowd was serious and quiet, and Hester Prynne suffered the stares of a thousand eyes, all looking at her bosom and her child. It was extremely difficult for her! It might have been easier for her if someone in the crowd, a man, woman

stern serious
throng a large crowd of people
fling throw

trample on walk on
taint giving something an unpleasant quality

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or child, had burst into laughter. Then she could have replied with a bitter smile, but today the crowd was serious and it was hard for Hester to bear. She wanted to scream and shout and run off the platform.

Then as Hester stood on the platform, her mind wandered and the crowd below her practically disappeared from before her eyes. She thought about her childhood in those moments and she remembered when she was a little girl and school days, sports she did as a child and silly quarrels she'd had with her friends. Everything came back to her! Perhaps it was her mind's way of relieving* her from the cruelty and hardness of the present reality.

Standing there, Hester remembered Old England, the village where she was born and her father's home. She remembered too just how poverty-stricken* her family had been and she saw again her father's face with its white beard and her mother's look of love. She saw her own face too, young and beautiful, reflected in a mirror. Then her mind took her to a man. An old man, pale and thin, a scholar* with dim* eyes. His left shoulder was higher than his right, his dull eyes seemed able to read the human soul. As her mind wandered, she thought about the huge cathedrals with their ancient architecture, the tall houses and narrow streets of the European city with a new life for her with that man.

Then she returned abruptly* to the present and the rude market place of the Puritan settlement. She saw everyone looking at her, studying her, yes *her* Hester Prynne, and the baby in her arms, and the scarlet letter A attached to her bosom. Could this really be true? She pulled her baby so fiercely* towards her that it cried out. As she

relieve make a bad situation less unpleasant
poverty-stricken very poor
scholar a highly educated person

dim without light
abruptly suddenly
fiercely wildly, violently

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looked down at the scarlet letter and touched it with her fingers, she realised that this and her baby were her real shame. They were her realities now. Everything else had vanished*!



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vanish disappear

Reading B2 First

1 Choose the best answer A, B, C, or D.

- 1 The people gathered outside the prison that day were
A ☐ excited.
B ☐ relaxed.
C ☐ serious.
D ☐ terrified.
- 2 Most of the women in the crowd that day
A ☐ felt sorry for the young woman.
B ☐ thought the judges had made the right decision.
C ☐ felt happy at seeing the young woman.
D ☐ thought the young woman deserved a greater punishment.
- 3 Hester Prynne
A ☐ looked old and ugly.
B ☐ seemed calm and composed.
C ☐ kept her head down and didn't look at anybody.
D ☐ started to cry when she saw the crowd.
- 4 The scaffold
A ☐ was in the market place.
B ☐ was far from the prison.
C ☐ was still used for hanging criminals.
D ☐ was where people prayed to the Madonna.
- 5 When she first stood on the scaffold, Hester Prynne
A ☐ didn't care about everyone staring at her.
B ☐ started to laugh at a man in the crowd.
C ☐ felt like she was going to faint.
D ☐ wanted to escape from this situation.
- 6 Then, while standing on the scaffold,
A ☐ she thought she'd die of shame.
B ☐ she remembered her life as a child.
C ☐ she thought about the father of her child.
D ☐ she dreamed about going back to Europe.

2 Write a short paragraph in answer to the following questions.

- Why were the women in the crowd unhappy?
- How would you describe Hester?
- Describe the general scene that morning.

.....

.....

.....

Pre-Reading Activities • Chapter Two

Vocabulary

3 Complete the table below with the missing words that you'll find in Chapter 2.

Noun	Adjective
1	eloquent
2	tender
3	sympathetic
4	indifferent
5	interesting
6	strange

Listening B2 First

4 Listen to the start of Chapter 2 and complete the text with the missing words.

As she (1) on the platform, Hester was well (2) of everyone looking at her and the scarlet letter. She suddenly noticed a (3) of people standing at the back of the crowd. One of these men was wearing traditional (4) clothes, which didn't (5) Hester, as Indians often came to visit the English (6) However, Hester was (7) on seeing the other man as one of his (8) was higher than the other. The man stared at Hester and put his finger to his (9) when he realized that she'd recognized him. Another man in the crowd told him about the (10) Hester had caused.