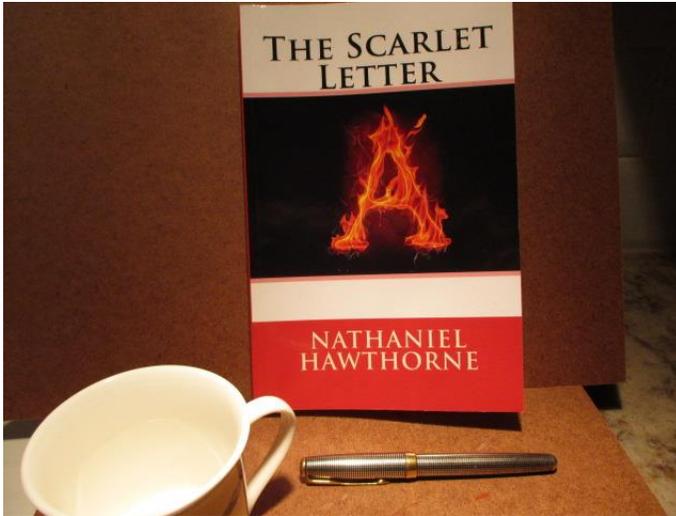


# The Scarlet Letter

By Rod Fraser



I first read *The Scarlet Letter* while studying at university in the 1960s. I liked the book, but never gave it a lot of thought, until Ray brought it up over lunch recently.

This is something that Ray often does. He mentions one of the great books from the past, and we spend time talking about it over coffee. It is a pleasant way to spend an afternoon. All the more so, because both of us had read a number of these classics when we were young.

I decided to buy the book, read it once again and

write a book review for interested readers. *The Scarlet Letter* is only 175 pages (including a short essay on *The Custom-House*), so over the course of a week, I read it and was deeply moved by the story. Given its historical context, I was reminded of the strict religious practices and cheerlessness of the early Puritans in Massachusetts.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century language in this book can be bothersome, particularly in the early pages. I persevered—and before long, I scarcely noticed. For those who might find it an obstacle, this review of *The Scarlet Letter* might be all you need to know about the indomitable Hester Prynne, her young daughter, Pearl, and the sadly inadequate Rev. Arthur Dimmesdale.



The novel opens with a gathering in the market square in the Puritan town of Boston circa 1650. A young woman, Hester Prynne, is led from the local prison, together with her baby in her arms. She mounts the steps of a scaffold and shows her shame to the crowd. She is dressed modestly, but for an embroidered scarlet letter fastened to her dress.

The embroidered letter is an 'A' which shows Hester for the 'adulterous woman' she is. She doesn't deny it. The child in her arms is evidence

enough. The only unknown is the paternity of the child, known as Pearl.

This Hester will not disclose. Despite many threats, she refuses to name the father. This puts her at considerable risk—of an extended prison sentence or even death. Fortunately for Hester, it seems her beauty and dignified bearing impress the court. They are lenient.

Her sentence is to remain standing on the scaffold in the public square for three hours, exposed to public humiliation, insults and leering glances. Then she is ordered to continue wearing the scarlet letter indefinitely while living in the community. Shortly thereafter, she is released from prison to take up her life, living in a small cottage at the edge of the village.



Hester Prynne is a married woman who immigrated to the New England colony two years earlier. Her husband had remained behind in England to clear up some business matters, and was thought to have been lost at sea.

This was not the case. He arrives in town at the time of Hester's imprisonment, visits her in her prison cell and confronts her with his accusations. Hester confesses she has wronged him, but she will

not give up the name of Pearl's father. In this, she is resolute.

She agrees, however, to keep the knowledge of their marriage a secret. Thereafter her husband takes up residence in the town, earning his living as a physician. He is now known as Roger Chillingworth. His status and influence in the town increase over time and he has little to do with either Hester or Pearl.

During the seven years over which this story unfolds, Pearl grows into an attractive child, but wild and unmanageable. Hester earns her living with her needle. She is a skilled seamstress and provides the leading figures of the town with embroidery, robes and garments.

Her husband shares accommodation with the Rev. Arthur Dimmesdale at a boarding house in town. While outwardly they are friends, it is clear Chillingworth suspects Dimmesdale of being Pearl's father and he intends to exact his revenge.

Over time, through Chillingworth's influence and medical potions, Arthur Dimmesdale becomes frail and unwell. Coupled with his guilt—for he is indeed Pearl's father—he becomes weakened and close to death.

It is at this point that Hester notes Dimmesdale's

frail condition and takes it upon herself to warn him of her husband's plan to ruin him—or worse. She meets Dimmesdale in the forest and tells him Chillingworth is her husband—and no friend to the reverend. He is warned to discontinue the friendship and to be wary of any potions he offers.

Dimmesdale is at the height of despair, not so much at his impending death or ruin, but by how unfairly he has treated Hester and Pearl. He regrets not having had the strength to face the wrath of the community, as Hester did—to stand up for the woman he loved and his sin-born daughter.

Hearing these words, while sharing a seat of moss with her lover, Hester confesses her love for Dimmesdale and suggests they run away from the colony and make a new life for themselves. This love is warmly reciprocated and Dimmesdale puts his trust in Hester to make their plans to leave four days hence on a ship sailing to the old country.

On the day prior to their departure, Dimmesdale gives an important speech on the occasion of the Governor's investiture. As always, he delivered a powerful sermon, and in the procession out of the church and into the public square that followed, Dimmesdale looked unwell.

Hester's words perhaps captured the moment best,

*"How feeble and pale he looked, amid his triumph! The energy ... which had held him up, until he should have delivered the sacred message ... was withdrawn."*

As Dimmesdale continued in the procession, he neared the scaffold where Hester had borne her public humiliation seven years earlier. He turned toward the scaffold and said this,

*"Hester, come hither. Come my little Pearl."*

*"The child ... flew to him and clasped her arms around his knees. Hester Prynne—slowly, as if impelled by inevitable fate, and against her strongest will—likewise drew near."*

*"Come Hester—come. Support me up yonder scaffold."*

*The crowd "beheld their minister, leaning on Hester's shoulder, and supported by her arm around him, approach the scaffold, and ascend its steps; while still the little hand of the sin-born child was clasped in his."*

*Dimmesdale "turned to Hester with an expression of doubt and anxiety in his eyes ... [There] was a feeble smile upon his lips."*

*He asked Hester, "Is this not better than what we dreamed of in the forest."*

*And then with his remaining strength, finally standing upon the scaffold, he turned to the crowd and said, "At last—at last—I stand upon the spot where, seven years ago, I should have stood, here with this woman, whose arm ... now sustains me. "*

Dimmesdale collapses after his confession, speaks of his love to Hester, and asks little Pearl to kiss him fondly. She does so willingly and he then passes away quietly with these words, *"His will be done!"*



There are a few loose ends to clear up with this story and I set them out below in the order of their happening.

- Roger Chillingworth died a year later and left a considerable portion of his estate to little Pearl.
- Hester and Pearl left Boston shortly after Roger Chillingworth's death and lived far away in some location, unknown to the people in Boston.
- Hester Prynne returned to Boston after many years and took up residence in the little cottage where she (and Pearl) had resided many years earlier.
- She continued to wear the scarlet letter of her own free will. It never left her person and had ceased to be a stigma or an object of ridicule.

- Although Hester continued to live modestly, as she always had, there were a few items of comfort in her cottage, and trifles too. She didn't want for anything.
- Many of the people of Boston in those later years, believed Pearl to be happily married with children. She continued to be mindful of her mother and considerate of her needs.
- When Hester died, her tombstone was inscribed with an epitaph that seemed like a riddle. For those in the know, it simply meant: On a black background, there is a red letter 'A'.

June 15, 2020