

# Public Shame and Private Guilt

An Analysis of *The Scarlet Letter*

Mr. Smith  
11<sup>th</sup> Grade English



# Learning Objective

- Students will analyze the major themes of *The Scarlet Letter*, focusing on how they relate to their lives and current society today.

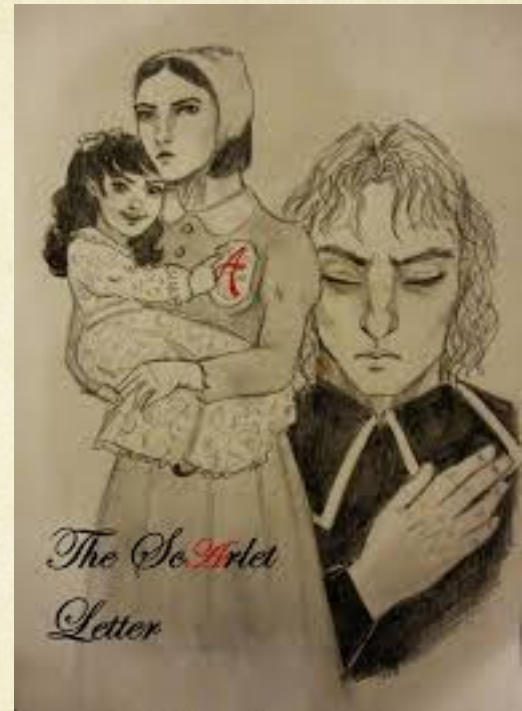


# Content Standard

Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research (apply grades 11–12 Reading standards to literature (e.g., “Demonstrate knowledge of seventeenth-, eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics”)).

# Main Focus

- We will be looking at themes of sin, guilt, and shame through the lives of characters such as Hester Prynne and Reverend Dimmesdale.



# Puritan Influence



The *Scarlet Letter* takes place in Boston, Mass. in the 1640's, which was largely ruled by the Puritan immigrants separating from England.

# How does Hawthorne portray the Puritans in the novel?

- Legalistic
- Cruel
- Unforgiving
- Stubborn
- Judgmental
- Narrow-minded
- Hypocritical
- Even through some are presented as having good character traits, most are labeled as “evil” and the author gives the underlying message that they are not altogether “good” people.
- Even Reverend Dimmesdale, in all of his holy qualities, is represented as a coward and liar.

# Puritan Law

Living lives of strict, legalistic faith and codes of conduct, any immoral act was ground to excommunicate someone from the Puritan community.



Hester Prynne became an example of this as she committed the grave sin of sex outside of marriage, giving the Puritans grounds to brand her with the scarlet letter.

Do you have a personal  
experience where you have  
been ostracized by family or  
friends because of an action  
that you committed that  
seemed immoral or wrong?  
How did you feel afterwards?



# Sin

Definition:



- transgression of divine law; any act regarded as such a transgression, especially a willful or deliberate violation of some religious or moral principle;
- any reprehensible or regrettable action or behavior.

# Puritan Religion

The Puritan community see earthly experience (sin) as an obstacle on the path to heaven. Thus, they view sin as a threat to the community that should be punished and suppressed.

Their solution to Hester's sin: Expel her from the community and brand her with a scarlet A.

- \*If you recall, some Puritans in the crowd wanted to brand her with a hot iron on her forehead and some even wanted to go as far as to kill her.



# Hawthorne's Paradox

- Remember, Hawthorne has already presented a negative view towards the Puritans, which is further established by the end of the novel as Hester Prynne's infamous sin is seemingly forgiven and she assumes the role of a saint.
- Her sainthood is placed in obvious contrast to the hypocrisy and cruelty of the Puritan town folk.
- Both Hester's and Dimmesdale's sin allowed them to live life differently, developing personal growth, sympathy, and an understanding of others.

# Shame

Definition:



- the painful feeling arising from the consciousness of something dishonorable or improper done by oneself or another;
- disgrace, dishonor, or public contempt.

# The Scarlet Letter = Shame

The main purpose of forcing Hester Prynne to wear the scarlet A for the rest of her life was not simply so that everybody in town would always know that she fornicated, but mainly to remind Hester herself that she was a sinner and deserved the punishment that she received.

Every time she looked at the letter on her chest, she was forced to think about the immoral choice that lead her there, as well as the sovereign punishment that she was undergoing.

Did her shame change her?  
How did Hester's character  
develop over the course of the  
novel?

Do you think that she felt  
guilty for her sin?

# Guilt

Definition:



- the fact or state of having committed an offense, crime, violation, or wrong, especially against moral law;
- a feeling of responsibility or remorse for some offense, crime, or wrong, whether real or imagined.

# Shame Vs. Guilt

Which character in the novel felt more guilt: Hester or Reverend Dimmesdale?

Of course it was the reverend! But why?

Remember, one definition of shame is disgrace, dishonor, and public contempt, all of which Hester felt due to the scarlet A forever on her chest. Yet, Dimmesdale hid his sin and therefore only felt the burden of his own conscience, which is guilt.



# Reverend Dimmesdale's Dirty Little Secret!

- The reverend's guilt had major consequences on his private and social life:
  - Self abuse
  - Ailing health
  - Constant fear
  - Ultimately...death

In the end of the novel, Hester's open shame seemed desirable compared to Dimmesdale's suppressed guilt.



Either criticize or defend the  
actions of Reverend  
Dimmesdale to keep quiet and  
refuse to admit that he was  
Hester's accomplice.

Are his actions justified based  
on the time period and  
culture? What would you have  
done in his shoes?

# How does *The Scarlet Letter* relate to us today?

- Lasting themes that mirror our own personal lives (guilt, shame, exclusion, revenge, etc.)
- Pop culture (movies such as *Easy A*, *Silver Linings Playbook*, *Pretty Little Liars*); these themes and characters still permeate the entertainment industry and modern literature.
- The plot is very relevant to current public, social affairs—and we will find out just how relevant in our next assignment!



Scarlett Letter Video

# Cultural Relevance Project

Students will conduct research on a pop culture icon that has undergone a public scandal, whether that be sexual misconduct or any other transgression of moral or legal law. Therefore, you will be required to search the internet, newspapers, and gossip magazine sites in order to find a story that fulfills the requirement for this assignment.

The people include:

- Business Professionals
- Actors/Singers
- Professional Athletes
- Government Officials



# Project Details

You will use Tumblr. to create a blog, presenting yourself as the famous person and write about the turmoil that they have undergone due to the scandal.

Students should use the text as a guide, focusing on the sin, guilt, and shame of characters from the novel. Analyzing their thoughts, emotions, and points of view, your blog should be written as a journal entry that examines the emotional pain created from such things as:

- Public humiliation
- Social denouncement
- Personal guilt/shame
- The search for justification

Many of these famous people have given public apologies for their actions, so it would be befitting for you to find these and use them in your journal entry as well.

# The Final Step

- Please be sure to focus on the original problem, the social and personal consequences, and the search for resolution, if there even be one.
- Once your blogs are complete, you are required to comment on at least two classmate's blogs, first telling them what you liked about the journal entry, then identify how it related to *The Scarlet Letter*, and lastly offer any critiques to their writing or subject matter.
- Ok! Let's dig up some dirt and find some scandals!