

Hester Prynne

She married Chillingworth although she did not love him. The early chapters of the book suggest that, prior to her marriage, Hester was a strong-willed and impetuous young woman—she remembers her parents as loving guides who frequently had to restrain her incautious behavior. The fact that she has an affair also suggests that she once had a passionate nature. Shamed and alienated from the rest of the community, Hester becomes contemplative. She speculates on human nature, social organization, and larger moral questions. Hester's tribulations also lead her to be stoic and a freethinker.

Hester also becomes a kind of compassionate maternal figure as a result of her experiences. Hester moderates her tendency to be rash, for she knows that such behavior could cause her to lose her daughter, Pearl. Hester is also maternal with respect to society: she cares for the poor and brings them food and clothing. By the novel's end, Hester has become a proto feminist mother figure to the women of the community. The shame attached to her scarlet letter is long gone. Women recognize that her punishment stemmed in part from the town fathers' sexism, and they come to Hester seeking shelter from the sexist forces under which they themselves suffer. Throughout *The Scarlet Letter* Hester is portrayed as an intelligent, capable, but not necessarily extraordinary woman. It is the extraordinary circumstances shaping her that make her such an important figure.

Roger Chillingworth

His twisted, stooped, deformed shoulders mirror his distorted soul. From what the reader is told of his early years with Hester, he was a difficult husband. He ignored his wife for much of the time, yet expected her to nourish his soul with affection when he did condescend to spend time with her. Chillingworth's decision to assume the identity of a "leech," or doctor, is fitting. Unable to engage in equitable relationships with those around him, he feeds on the vitality of others as a way of energizing his own projects. Chillingworth's death is a result of the nature of his character. After Dimmesdale dies, Chillingworth no longer has a victim. Similarly, Dimmesdale's revelation that he is Pearl's father removes Hester from the old man's clutches. Having lost the objects of his revenge, the leech has no choice but to die.

Ultimately, Chillingworth represents true evil. He is associated with secular and sometimes illicit forms of knowledge, as his chemical experiments and medical practices occasionally verge on witchcraft and murder. He is interested in revenge, not justice, and he seeks the deliberate destruction of others rather than a redress of wrongs. His desire to hurt others stands in contrast to Hester and Dimmesdale's sin, which had love, not hate, as its intent. Any harm that may have come from the young lovers' deed was unanticipated and inadvertent, whereas Chillingworth reaps deliberate harm.

Arthur Dimmesdale

An individual whose identity owes more to external circumstances than to his innate nature. The reader is told that Dimmesdale was a scholar of some renown at Oxford University. The fact that Hester takes all of the blame for their shared sin goads his conscience, and his resultant mental anguish and physical weakness open up his mind and allow him to empathize with others. Consequently, he becomes an eloquent and emotionally powerful speaker and a compassionate leader, and his congregation is able to receive meaningful spiritual guidance from him.

Ironically, the townspeople do not believe Dimmesdale's protestations of sinfulness. Given his background and his penchant for rhetorical speech, Dimmesdale's congregation generally interprets his sermons allegorically rather than as expressions of any personal guilt. This drives Dimmesdale to further internalize his guilt and self-punishment and leads to still more deterioration in his physical and spiritual condition. The town's idolization of him reaches new heights after his Election Day sermon, which is his last. In his death, Dimmesdale becomes even more of an icon than he was in life. Many believe his confession was a symbolic act, while others believe Dimmesdale's fate was an example of divine judgment.

Pearl

Hester's daughter, Pearl, functions primarily as a symbol. She is quite young during most of the events of this novel—when Dimmesdale dies she is only seven years old—and her real importance lies in her ability to provoke the adult characters in the book. She asks them pointed questions and draws their attention, and the reader's, to the denied or overlooked truths of the adult world. In general, children in *The Scarlet Letter* are portrayed as more perceptive and more honest than adults, and Pearl is the most perceptive of them all.

Pearl makes us constantly aware of her mother's scarlet letter and of the society that produced it. From an early age, she fixates on the emblem. Pearl's innocent, or perhaps intuitive, comments about the letter raise crucial questions about its meaning. Similarly, she inquires about the relationships between those around her—most important, the relationship between Hester and Dimmesdale—and offers perceptive critiques of them. Pearl provides the text's harshest, and most penetrating, judgment of Dimmesdale's failure to admit to his adultery. Once her father's identity is revealed, Pearl is no longer needed in this symbolic capacity; at Dimmesdale's death she becomes fully "human," leaving behind her otherworldliness and her preternatural vision.