

Brian Ho, Period 5, Scarlet Letter Notes:

**Introduction:**

- Hometown of Salem, Massachusetts - Once a “bustling wharf,” now “exhibits few or no symptoms of commercial life” (pg 2)
- The Custom-House - large brick building with an enormous American Eagle over the entrance (pg 2,3)
- Question C: The text about merchants either being joyful or somber based on how likely their goods were to be turned into gold made me think about the risks and life of being a sea-merchant. They are traveling for months on end (from Africa / South America to Salem), to a place unfamiliar and no guarantee they would come out with a profit. It made me think how tough life was, with only your fellow sailors to keep you company, limited food, threat of pirates, seasickness, and long travel with only the ocean blue in sight. (pg 3,4)
- Lack of cleanliness was associated with “infrequent access” from woman with “her tools of magic, the broom and mop” (pg 4)
- Question D: The narrator’s description of his lineage and family history in Salem elicited an emotional response in the form of sentimentality. I thought of my ancestors, how my ancestors have inhabited Taiwan until my grandparents raised my parents in America, now leading to my current life here.(pg 5)
- Question E: If persecutors were considered glorifying God / servicing mankind and writing story-books were not, what occupations were considered “good” in the time period of the story, similar to modern age doctors/lawyers? (pg 6)
- Question A: A careless reader might fail to notice that the narrator, in the seven previous pages, has been creating a setting in the form of Salem, carefully giving relevant context and details that are necessary in the future. He has outlined why he stays in Salem despite better opportunities. In other words, the pattern of his writing has been with a singular goal - set up the setting for his experiences in the Custom-House. (pg 7)
- Question B: I found it most interesting that political affiliation played a large part in society during that time period, quite similar to how it plays a role in modern society.

“The greater part of my officers were Whigs. It was well for their venerable brotherhood, that the new Surveyor was not a politician.” (pg 8)

- “They spoke with far more interest and unction of their morning’s breakfast, or yesterday’s, to-day’s or tomorrow’s dinner, than of the shipwreck of forty or fifty years ago, and all the world’s wonders which they had witnessed with their youthful eyes. (pg 10) - The Custom-House officers were veteran sea-captains with wealths of knowledge and experience - yet it seems to have escaped them
- Father of the Custom-House: The Inspector - One brief sigh was enough to remove all the tragedy from his mind and allow him to continue work (pg 11)
- The Collector - brilliant military career, now spending his remaining years in Salem (pg 13)
- Fortress of Ticonderoga (pg 15)
- Jonathan Pue, former Surveyor (pg 20)
- The narrator discovers what I am inferring to be the Scarlet Letter in the untouched pile of “ancient” documents in the corner of the Custom-House (pg 21)
- Scarlet Letter possessed a feeling of “red-hot iron” upon placing it on his chest (pg 21)
- Narrator (in his mind) is confronted by the ghost of Jonathan Pue and asked to share the story of the Scarlet Letter with the public (pg 23)
- Hester Prynne - main character of the Scarlet Letter (pg 22, 23)
- Hawthorne suggests that as one works for the Custom-House as an officer, they lose their strength for self-support by leaning on the arm of the Republic. The idea is that working as an officer drains the willingness and availability of other ventures. (pg 26)
- Question C: “There are few uglier traits of human nature than this tendency -- to grow cruel, merely because they possessed the power of inflicting harm.” (pg 28) What Hawthorne says made me reflect on my own experiences - I, too, have noticed that those who were once genuine and amicable transformed into rude and selfish people once they obtained a means of determining superiority over other people. In other words, ego.
- It seems as if the election of General Taylor, who is considered a hostile administration, introduced thoughts of resignation to Hawthorne and he thus took the investment to once again be a literary man. (pg 28, 29)

## **Chapter 1: The Prison Door**

- Prison is one of the oldest “buildings” in Boston. (pg 33)
- Ann Hutchinson
- Question D: Feelings of anxiety of what is about to come - the presentation of the prison as rusted and eerie along with the foreshadowing of “relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow” and suggestion that a rose might bring some sweet moral blossom makes me brace myself for what is to come (pg 34)

## **Chapter 2: The Market-Place**

- Introduction of the character Hester Prynne - disliked by the entire community, including women. They wish to inflict varying punishments on her for her crimes. (pg 35)
- Letter A embroidered into dress. Hester has a three month old baby. Tall, black eyes, dark glossy hair, described as beautiful (pg 37)
- Paraded through the streets from the prison to the marketplace (pg 38)
- Question C: The quote “Reminiscences, the most trifling and immaterial, passages of infancy and school-days -- Possibly, it was an instinctive device of her spirit, to relieve itself, -- from the cruel weight and hardness of the reality” reminds me of those who say their lives “flash before their eyes” when they are in a near death situation. I wonder if Hawthorne has experienced something similar to this to write something so similar to what is commonly known to be a phenomenon in the modern world. (pg 40)
- “Yet those same bleared optics had a strange, penetrating power, when it was their owner’s purpose to read the human soul. (pg 41)

## **Chapter 3: The Recognition**

- Hester Prynne - raised a great scandal in Master Dimmesdale’s church - wife of an English man who lived in Amsterdam, who sent her to Massachusetts first to look after some affairs. And yet, in two to three years of staying in Boston, she now has a baby. (pg 43)
- Punishment - stand for three hours on the platform of the pillory, and wear a mark of shame for the remainder of her life. (pg 43)

- Question A: I noticed, in order to retain the presence in the moment, but also add much needed context - that Hawthorne introduces a clueless traveler, who knows just as much about the situation as the reader, for a townspeople to explain it to him. This results in us gaining context while the story still remains present in the moment. Genius. (pg 42,43)
- The townspeople are very adamant on finding out who the father is - yet Hester refuses to speak. (pg 47)

#### **Chapter 4: The Interview**

- This chapter is quite hard to understand. From what I can tell, the stranger has a close relation with Hester. Potentially he is the husband from Amsterdam? Regardless, he announces his quest to search for the father as well as exchanging promises with Hester.

#### **Chapter 5: Hester at Her Needle**

- Hester is to be looked upon by other woman as the figure, body, and reality of sin (pg 54)
- “Her sin, her ignominy, were the roots which she had struck into the soil.” (pg 55)
- “Here, she said to herself, had been the scene of her guilt, and here should be the scene of her earthly punishment; and so, perchance, the torture of her daily shame would at length purge her soul, and work out another purity than that which she had lost; more saint-like, because the result of martyrdom.” (pg 55)
- Very skilled with the needle (pg 56)
- Her needle work appeared on garments of various peoples from governors to military men (pg 57)
- Charitable- created coarse garments for the poor (pg 57)
- “She stood apart from mortal interests, yet close beside them, like a ghost that revisits the familiar fireside, and can no longer make itself seen or felt” (pg 58)
- “The spot never grew callous; it seemed, on the contrary, to grow more sensitive with daily torture.” (pg 59)

#### **Chapter 6: Pearl**

- Infant referred to as her “pearl” pg(61)

- “In giving her existence, a great law had been broken; and the result was a being, whose elements were perhaps beautiful and brilliant, but all in disorder” (pg 62)
- Wild, desperate, defiant mood - “prolific of the storm and whirlwind” (pg 62)
- Seemed rather an airy sprite than a human child (pg 63)
- “Pearl was a born outcast of the infantile world. -- Nothing was more remarkable than the instinct, as it seemed, with which the child comprehended her loneliness;” (pg 64)
- Time shift to when Pearl is “big enough to run about” pg(67)
- Question E: Why is Hawthorne spending so many pages on the description of Pearl - her behaviors, reactions, etc. Perhaps he is setting up the story, especially with the constant time shifts, for Pearl to take over as the main character in the story. Or, perhaps he is setting up a personality for her so that her actions will make more sense in the future.

### **Chapter 7: The Governor’s Hall**

- Design on some part of the leading inhabitants to rid Hester of her child (pg 68)
- “It was the scarlet letter in another form; the scarlet letter endowed with life!” (pg 70), referring to Pearl
- “She resembled, in her fierce pursuit of them -- the scarlet fever, or some such half-fledged angel of judgment, -- whose mission was to punish the sins of the rising generation.” (pg 70)
- Question A: Hawthorne is extremely detailed in describing settings of different locations and situations. Even now, as Hester enters the entrance room, Hawthorne is describing the furniture and wall decor, which I think is very unique for an author to do.

### **Chapter 8: The Elf-Child and the Minister**

- Governor Bellingham, pastor John Wilson, Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, physician Roger Chillingworth
- “To the guidance of one who hath stumbled and fallen, amid the pitfalls of this world.” (pg 75) referring to Hester | Question B: It is surprising to me, the degree at which adultery is taboo in this age. It seems as if the scale of crimes is much less in comparison to modern times, and thus seemingly “smaller” crimes in today’s world are seen as much

more flagrant in Hester's time. Either it is the scale of crimes, or something in relation to religion. I personally wouldn't know.

- "To remind her, at every moment, of her fall, -- but yet to teach her, as it were by the Creator's sacred pledge, that, if she bring the child to heaven, the child also will bring its parent thither! (pg 79)
- "Even thus early had the child saved her from Satan's snare." | The usage of "even" suggests that there will be more incidents to come -- it suggests that the relation between Hester and Pearl will be a fixture throughout the rest of the story.

*A. What did you notice that a careless or unpracticed reader might have missed? Watch especially for patterns, changes, anomalies, and contradictions.*

*B. What did you find most strange, interesting, ironic, revealing, or beautiful? This is another way of thinking about A, above. The strange, for example, is often anomalous, and the ironic is contradictory.*

*C. What did this text, or an aspect of it, remind you of, or what did it get you thinking about? This is a way of making connections between texts (I use that term to include just about anything.). While we may not fully understand the text under study, if we can consider it in relation to a text we know a bit better, we have a better chance of understanding it. If you've never been to City X, for instance, I would try to explain it to you in terms of cities you've been to.*

*D. What emotional responses did you have when reading? Most students won't touch this question with a ten-foot pole, mostly because they are afraid to reveal anything personal and because they think that emotional reactions cannot be critical ones.*

*E. What questions did this reading raise for you? Good questions tend to be open-ended, specific, and genuine.*