



Unit AS 2:

The Study of Prose pre 1900

Hawthorne: The Scarlet Letter

In this Unit there are 4 Assessment Objectives involved – A01, A02, A03 and A05.

A01: Textual knowledge and understanding, and communication

In this examination, the candidate should be able to articulate informed and relevant responses that communicate effectively knowledge and understanding of a selected novel.

This AO involves the student's knowledge and understanding of the novel, and ability to express relevant ideas accurately and coherently, using appropriate terminology and concepts. Quality of written communication is taken into consideration in all units.

Plot Overview

The Scarlet Letter opens with a scene of punishment. A young woman, Hester Prynne, having been convicted of the crime of adultery, is to be paraded through the town of Boston, an embroidered scarlet letter A emblazoned on her chest as public pronouncement of her sin. She carries with her the result of her adultery, her three-month-old child, Pearl.

Watched by her Puritan community, Hester is required to ascend the town's scaffold to endure public humiliation for her sin. While on the platform, she recognises her husband in the crowd. He had sent her ahead to the colonies while he remained at home to settle his affairs. That was two years previous and he had subsequently been presumed lost at sea.

On the platform, Hester is put under pressure to reveal the name of Pearl's father by the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, a man revered by his community for his uprightness and godliness. Hester, maintaining great dignity, does not bow to the intense pressure, refusing to divulge the name of the child's father. She is returned to prison where she is visited by her husband who, when she continues to withhold the father's name, demands that she also keeps his identity secret. Her husband assumes the name of Roger Chillingworth.

Hester is released from prison after a period of three years and moves to a home



situated between the town and the forest. She becomes known for her fine needlework and makes a living as a seamstress. Spurned by her community, Hester lives an isolated life with Pearl, whom she sees as the living embodiment of the scarlet letter, a constant reminder of her sin. Hester, true to Pearl in all other things, will not explain the meaning of the letter A and the child becomes increasingly spellbound by the ornate letter on her mother's breast.

Chillingworth, now living with Dimmesdale as his private physician, begins to suspect that Dimmesdale is Pearl's father and when he witnesses a mark imprinted on Dimmesdale's chest, his suspicions are confirmed. He determines to afflict and finally expose Dimmesdale.

Under the devious persecution of Chillingworth, Dimmesdale's physical and emotional condition deteriorates. His intense guilt concerning his adultery causes him psychological torment and he attempts to atone for his sin through corporal mortification (starvation and self-flagellation) and prolonged vigils.

Dimmesdale's emotional state reaches crisis point one night when he ascends the scaffold by himself and witnesses a red A illuminate the sky. Hester and Pearl coincidentally pass by and the three join together, "an electric chain" on the platform. Pearl asks Dimmesdale to acknowledge Hester and her on the scaffold in daylight but Dimmesdale replies that such a revelation will only be "before the judgement-seat" and not in this world. This meeting is witnessed by the "arch-fiend" Chillingworth, unseen in the darkness.

Dimmesdale's health and vitality continue to wear down. Meanwhile, Chillingworth's devotion to psychologically torturing Dimmesdale begins to affect his own humanity and when Hester meets him she likens him to a devil. Hester decides to meet with Dimmesdale to tell him Chillingworth's real identity and intention, and she plans their encounter in the forest. The pair, along with Pearl, plan to escape back to Europe. Leaving the forest, the minister prepares to deliver a significant address for the installation of the new governor. Those assembled at the installation agree that this sermon is the most affecting the minister has ever preached. After the homily, Dimmesdale, supported by Hester and holding Pearl's hand, climbs the scaffold. He admits his sin to the assembled crowd and tears open his garment to reveal "his own red stigma" carved into his chest. Cradled by Hester and kissed by Pearl, he dies on the scaffold having escaped the clutches of Chillingworth.

Chillingworth dies soon after Dimmesdale and bequeaths a considerable fortune to Pearl, who becomes the richest heiress in the New World. Hester and Pearl leave Boston, only for Hester to return some years later. Hester voluntarily chooses to wear the Scarlet Letter until her death when she is buried beside Dimmesdale, their tombstone being marked by a scarlet letter "A".

Characters

Hester Prynne

Hester is the novel's protagonist. Throughout the novel she embodies female strength, individuality, defiance and integrity. However, she lives amongst those who seek to stigmatize her as nothing more than a one-dimensional representation of sexual sin. Having been found guilty of adultery, she is sentenced to wear a scarlet letter A upon



her bosom as a “living sermon against sin”. Her entrance in the novel as she repels the Puritan official and steps into the gaze of the assembled crowd with the infant Pearl in her arms, marks her out as independent, dignified and resilient of character. She is described as “haughty” with a “figure of perfect elegance”, and her natural beauty, her “dark and abundant hair” and “deep black eyes” are in marked contrast to the Puritan women who are assembled to scorn her sinfulness. She may appear to stand proud but nonetheless, the narrator suggests that she is suffering on the scaffold “as if her heart had been flung into the street”. The narrator points out that a stranger coming across this event might have mistaken Hester for the Madonna with Child, “that sacred image of sinless motherhood, whose infant was to redeem the world”, so undermining both her crime and the Puritan society’s punishment.

When Hester is visited in prison by Chillingworth, she faces her husband fearfully but frankly. It becomes apparent that theirs had been a loveless marriage: Hester openly admits she “felt no love nor feigned any” and Chillingworth declares that he had “betrayed (Hester’s) budding youth”. When added to the fact that Hester was a young woman with “an impulsive and passionate nature” and that Chillingworth, having sent her alone to the New World, was presumed lost at sea, there germinates an impression that culpability for her sin may not be as straightforward as the Puritan magistrates would suggest.

Upon leaving prison, Hester continues to display her independence and her innate strength of character. She chooses to stay in Boston and accept her earthly punishment in the place where she admitted her guilt; she elects to live on the periphery of her community and to accept her isolation; she assents to the erosion of her individuality as she becomes the “symbol at which the preacher and moralist might point”. But her isolation and sense of banishment breed a form of speculation that would have shocked the Puritan leaders, and allow Hester to feel able to muse on such matters as Puritan hypocrisy and sexual infidelity (“had Hester sinned alone?”). Nevertheless, although she remains “patient - a martyr indeed”, her loneliness and the community’s unerring focus upon her as a symbol of sin begin to take a toll on her nature, and when she “forbears to pray for her enemies” in case the words of her prayers should “twist themselves into a curse” it becomes clear, as the narrator states, that one of the saddest results of Hester’s sin is her loss of faith.

Hester’s defiance and inner strength are further embodied when she refuses to capitulate to Governor Bellingham’s demand that she and Pearl should be separated for their souls’ mutual benefit. Hester defies the Governor in an uncompromising exchange at his residence where she vehemently argues that “God gave me the child” and declares “Ye shall not take her!”.

As Hester continues in a life of seclusion, her lack of social contact results in her continuing to intellectually test Puritan law. She becomes used to judging right and wrong by her own standards and does not feel compelled to accept “any standard [of judgement] external to herself”. Rather than her punishment creating unerring conformity and guilt for her sin, it leads to a quiet independence of thought as Hester assumes a “freedom of speculation...which our forefathers...would have held to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatized by the scarlet letter”. Her non-conformity and the rationalism of her thoughts, her religious dissension, and her ultimate conclusion that “the whole system of society is to be torn down and built up anew”, mark Hester as free of mind and bold of spirit. Ultimately, the scarlet letter of punishment becomes Hester’s intellectual “passport into regions where other women dared not tread”.



While Hester's mind may assume wild levels of speculation, her outward being conforms "with the most perfect quietude to the external regulations of society." Indeed, such is her physical obedience to her sentence that she begins to win over society with her "faithful labor", and a "species of general regard" grows up among the Puritans towards her. With her perceived submission to her punishment, the purity of her existence, her stoical works of charity, her generosity, and the warmth and richness of her nature towards the sick, she comes to be considered as a "Sister of Mercy" and the letter A, "the symbol of her calling" loses much of the stigma of its original meaning, and begins to be considered as signifying "Able". The letter which had originally been seen as a mark of powerlessness now bestows on Hester the universal power of "a woman's strength", and "the mark of shame" begins to assume a sanctity of its own having "the effect of the cross on a nun's bosom."

The final scenes in the novel emphasise Hester's character as independent, strong, and intellectually and morally honest. Having returned of her own free will to Boston and resumed "her long forgotten shame", Hester's letter ceases to be a stigma but is viewed as something to be "looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too." She becomes a confidante for the community's women, yet continues to remain outside the Puritan theocracy by maintaining that "a new truth would be revealed" to ensure mutually rewarding relations between men and women; that the apostle of the coming revelation "must be a woman"; and that only genuine love which unlike marital legalism has "a consecration of its own" can make us happy.

When she dies, Hester is buried alongside Dimmesdale, their shared tombstone simply marked with the letter A.

Arthur Dimmesdale

Dimmesdale is a young, articulate and sensitive Puritan preacher. Throughout the novel he embodies the costly contradiction between one's public and private lives. He is trapped between his understanding of his need for repentance and his awareness that his dishonesty may well be protecting the fledgling church (which views "Godly Master Dimmesdale" as God's representative on earth) from a serious crisis of faith. He loathes his hypocrisy, yet, until late in the novel, he lacks the strength to publicly disclose his sin.

Dimmesdale is described as university educated, eloquent and of strong religious fervour. His aspect is described as "striking" with "brown, melancholy eyes" and a "tremulous" mouth, suggesting a natural sensitivity and compassion of spirit. Yet, despite being lauded by the Puritan people, there is a sense of isolation and remoteness about him as though, like Hester, he "felt himself quite astray and at a loss in the pathway of human existence."

The irony of Dimmesdale's hypocritical position is continually alluded to, and some feeling of the complications of his elevated position and his lack of personal strength becomes clear. Bellingham states that "the responsibility of this woman's soul lies greatly with you"; Dimmesdale's own sermon exhorts Hester to "Be not silent for any mistaken pity and tenderness for [the child's father]", and the people are so awed by Dimmesdale's powerful words that they feel the guilty father will be "compelled to ascend the scaffold". Nonetheless, when Hester does not speak, Dimmesdale, with his hand upon his heart, is more than relieved at the "Wondrous strength and generosity of a woman's heart!"



As he falls under the spell of Chillingworth, Dimmesdale's physical and emotional health suffers. Ironically, the more physically emaciated he becomes, and the more "gnawed and tortured" his soul, the higher the reverence in which Dimmesdale is held by his congregation. He is deemed a "heaven-ordained apostle", a "miracle of holiness" and "the mouth piece of Heaven's messages". Each time he attempts to confess in the pulpit, he only succeeds in further raising his esteem in the eyes of his congregation, who "heard it all, and did but reverence him the more". His hypocrisy and his guilt only serve to further burden him, and his self-loathing intensifies. Indeed, when prayer cannot bring release from his guilt, he attempts to purge his soul by self-flagellation, fasting and vigils. But these actions avail him nothing and the narrator simply comments on Dimmesdale's joylessness and the "unspeakable misery of a life so false".

The second scaffold scene is a desperate attempt by Dimmesdale to ascend the platform of shame and alleviate the agony of his "heaven defying guilt". But it is a redundant, fearful gesture at public confession, carried out in darkness rather than light. Even as he stands with Hester and Pearl, the scene illuminated by a meteor, Dimmesdale views the heavenly glow to be a letter A, a divine admonishment of his sin. Pearl's final words to the minister in this scaffold scene pointedly underline Dimmesdale's moral situation and strike at the root of the minister's religious and emotional distress: "Thou wast not bold! - thou wast not true!" (These words foreshadow the narrator's conclusion that one of the morals from Dimmesdale's death is to avoid hypocrisy and "Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!")

When Dimmesdale and Hester meet in the forest, a stark contrast is evident in how the pair have existed over the previous seven years. In contrast to the peace and inner strength found by Hester, Dimmesdale exists in "bitterness and agony of heart" at the contradiction between what he is seen to be and what he truly is. And when he tells Hester "Happy are you, Hester that wear the scarlet letter openly upon your bosom. Mine burns in secret", there is pointed truth in his words. His self-inflicted, introspective torture has proved far worse than Hester's public punishment, perhaps suggesting that hypocrisy, unfaithfulness, and dishonesty to one's public position are greater crimes than adultery.

In the final scaffold scene, Dimmesdale is freed from guilt by his public confession and finds forgiveness and salvation. The presence of Hester and Pearl on the platform gives him the strength to carry his confession through. He dies, having been kissed by Pearl and having escaped Chillingworth, but unable to offer any guarantee of a shared afterlife to Hester.

Pearl

For much of the novel Hester's daughter Pearl assumes merely a symbolic role. She is the "Pearl of great price" purchased at the cost of her mother's reputation. She is the "living embodiment of the scarlet letter", "an imp of evil" and a "product of sin" and as such her actions and demeanour are often in contrast to the Puritans' expectations of how a child should behave. Although Hester never wavers in her love and loyalty to her daughter, there are times when she questions the rebellious, apparently malicious, actions of her child who "could not be made amenable to rules". Pearl's fiendish questions and swings of moods, and her incapability of "human sorrow", continually remind Hester of her sin, while Hester's preference for dressing Pearl in colours



of red and gold makes the child's link to the symbol on Hester's bosom explicit. Furthermore, Pearl's other-worldly tendencies, her resemblance to a "scarlet fever" and to a "little jet of flame" ensure that the Puritans' allegorising of her as "the living hieroglyphic" of sexual sin is never forgotten.

Since Pearl is viewed by the Puritans as the product of a man's sinful nature, it is fitting therefore that she is at her freest in the forest where she plays uninhibitedly with the woodland's inhabitants, catches the sunlight, and where the "mother-forest... recognized a kindred wildness in the human child." Outside of the stifling Puritan regulations, Pearl is a much gentler creature. It is even rumoured that a wolf "offered its savage head to be patted by her hand."

Following Dimmesdale's confession at the final scaffold scene, Pearl kisses the dying preacher and her "tears fell upon her father's cheek". For the first time in her life, Pearl experiences genuine sorrow and from that moment Pearl is presented as becoming a rounded human being capable of the full range of emotions who rather than "for ever do battle with the world" has become "a woman in it".

Having been bequeathed Chillingworth's fortune, she leaves New England and finds love with an Italian Count.

Roger Chillingworth

Chillingworth is Hester's husband whom she married before coming to Boston. He is older than she, a scholar of "cold composure" and physically "misshapen". His age, his studious nature, and perhaps the hinted sexual incapacity seen in his physical deformity mark him out as a man unlikely to provide for the physical and emotional needs of Hester who "had in her nature a rich, voluptuous oriental characteristic." And he freely admits with respect to Hester's adultery that "the scale hangs fairly balanced" concerning the levels of culpability between Hester and himself. Nonetheless, Chillingworth determines to seek Pearl's father as he "sought truth in books [and] sought gold in alchemy" and so begins a quest that sees him become the very manifestation of evil.

As Chillingworth becomes more dominated by his desire for revenge, so he is overtaken by satanic power. His physical features begin to change, his face becomes "ugly and evil" and a "blue and ominous" light glimmers in his eyes. He instinctively knows that Dimmesdale "hath done a wild thing ere now...in the hot passion of his heart!" and as their relationship develops, so Chillingworth's suspicions grow. These suspicions are confirmed when Chillingworth discerns the mark on the minister's breast; the physician's reactions upon this discovery are directly paralleled with Satan's reactions "when a precious human soul is lost" and emphasise the evil into which he has fallen.

Chillingworth's vengeful desire to keep Dimmesdale "for ever on the rack" comes at the ultimate cost of his humanity. When he speaks with Hester in the forest, it is said that "there came a glare of red light out of his eyes" and "a circle of ominous shadow [moved] along with his deformity". The more consumed he is by his torture of Dimmesdale, the more his physiognomy mirrors the cankerous evil in his heart. Chillingworth's life is so focused on retribution that once Dimmesdale escapes into death, there is no meaning left in existence for him and he dies within a year of Dimmesdale. His need for revenge and his desire for the ruin of others mark



Chillingworth as a fiend-like character, a sad indictment of “man’s faculty of transforming himself into a devil”.

Mistress Hibbins

Mistress Hibbins is a widow who lives with her brother, Governor Bellingham. She is commonly rumoured to be a witch, a “principal actor in all the works of necromancy” that take place in the forest at night, and frequently tempts Hester and Dimmesdale to enter into pacts with the “black man”. She frequently exhibits an ability to pinpoint characters’ guilt, she claims to be able to judge who has visited the forest, and it is even questioned whether she is able to read characters’ thoughts. Mistress Hibbins exemplifies the effects of Puritan repression on women - widowed, ageing, querulous and eccentric, she is presented both as a symbol of evil within the community, and as a victim of the irrational fears of those who view life as a literal battle between good and evil.



A02: Narrative methods

In this examination, the candidate should analyse the writer's use of such narrative methods as form, structure and language.

The student should analyse relevantly the ways in which meanings are shaped in novels. This means identifying narrative methods and showing how these methods relate to the key terms of the question.

Discussing narrative methods - advice to teachers and students:

As this unit is closed book, examiners will be realistic about the amount of detail which can be provided in the time available. It is anticipated that the larger-scale features of form, structure and language will be most useful in constructing a relevant response in the time available.

A few general stylistic features:

Hawthorne's use of a symbolic method encourages multiple interpretations of aspects of the novel.

Hester's sin violates Puritan laws concerning sexual conduct and reinforces the stereotype of the female as a temptress in the manner of Eve in the Garden of Eden, whose seduction of Adam brought about the Fall of Man. She is scrutinized initially through the eyes of the matronly "goodwives" whose viewpoint is harsh and unflinching, yet a young wife with a child (someone perhaps more in touch with the emotional and physical needs of Hester) argues that "the pang" of Hester's sin "will be always in her heart." Thus from the beginning, the views of the community concerning the effects of Hester's sin are not uniform.

Whilst on the platform, Hester's deportment contradicts that of the typical "fallen woman". She is "serene", "lady-like" and "dignified" and there are even ironic suggestions of the angelic in descriptions of how "her beauty shone out, and made a halo of the misfortune and ignominy in which she was enveloped". Furthermore, there are ironic references to Hester as "the image of Divine Maternity" and the suggestion that, by an uninformed on-looker, Hester and Pearl on the platform could have been assumed to be a "sacred image of sinless motherhood". This suggests that her act may not be universally evil, but criminal only in the context of the Puritan society where she lives.

Hester's crime of passion is further illuminated when she meets Dimmesdale in the forest. In this natural environment, outside Puritan jurisdiction, Hester can remove her stigmatic A. She lets down her hair, and her "sex, her youth, and the whole richness of her beauty came back". The suggestion that, upon Hester's unpinning of the brand of her sin, the sunshine burst forth "as with a sudden smile of heaven" implies that the natural world is in sympathy with the love between her and Dimmesdale. Their "sin" is seen to be something pure, a natural act of passion, and thus gains the "sympathy of Nature" which has never been "subjugated by human law, nor illumined by higher truth." Hence, Hester and Dimmesdale's affection is celebrated for the trueness and naturalness of the bond between them.

The Scarlet A - The scarlet letter was intended by the Puritan authorities to be a "mark of shame" on its wearer and a "living sermon" to those in the community who may indulge in sexual sin. Its meaning was designated by the patriarchal Puritan



elders. But Hester from the beginning chooses to make her mark of sin a mark of her individuality. It is sumptuous and decorative, made of “fine red cloth, surrounded with elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread”. Such is its artistic beauty, that the A has “the effect of a spell” that “inclosed [Hester] in a sphere by herself.” And so from the outset, the A marks Hester as separate from her community and in a sense shields her personality behind the meaning ascribed to her badge by the Puritan judiciary.

The A is also suggested to bestow upon Hester “a sympathetic knowledge of the hidden sin in other hearts” so that she is able to question the “model[s] of piety” in her community. It is said to “sometimes...give a sympathetic throb” as she passed members of the village. The talismanic symbol, which was expected to bring punishment, guilt, and repentance, causes Hester to question the hearts of magistrates, ministers, matrons and young maidens and ultimately, by leaving “nothing, whether in youth or age, for this poor sinner to revere”, costs her her faith. Rather than ensure her salvation, the letter A brought a scepticism that in Puritan society verged on the damnable.

As Hester ceaselessly provides acts of charity within the community, so the meaning of the A evolves. Instead of a mark of dishonour, it becomes “the symbol of her calling”, imbued with “power to do and power to sympathize”. Many in her community refuse to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification and see it as symbolic of “Able; so strong was Hester Prynne with a woman’s strength.” With the original denotation of the letter being erased, the community begins to view the letter as a positive insignia, “not of that one sin” (her adultery) but “of her many good deeds since.”

The A’s symbolism continues to evolve among the townsfolk and they see it as investing Hester with a sense of saintliness. It is said to have “the effect of the cross on a nun’s bosom” and it is rumoured to have enough religious power to impart “to the wearer a kind of sacredness, which enabled her to walk securely amid all perils”. Rather than a torture and a humiliation, it is viewed as a physical protection, an icon that “kept her safe” from thieves’ violence and Indians’ arrows. Later, when Dimmesdale refers to Hester as his “better angel”, the sacred association between the scarlet letter and its wearer becomes cemented and the effect of the emblem now seems to afford divine dignity rather than worldly humiliation.

The contrast between the scarlet letter’s intention and its outcome is a marked one. What had been intended to be a constant reminder of sin and guilt, a punishment to break the proud spirit of the sinner, eventually becomes a badge of honour, a badge endowed with its own sense of religious reverence. But the letter also freed Hester from the intellectual shackles of the Puritan community. Being isolated from Puritan society, having “become the symbol at which the preacher and moralist might point”, Hester began to reject Puritan law as being “no law for her mind”, and in this developing individualism she “assumed a freedom of speculation... [which would have been held to be] a deadlier crime than that stigmatized by the scarlet letter.” In questioning the theocratic basis of society, she speculates on the patriarchal, Puritan interpretation of God’s law, and her dissent becomes both religious and secular. By the novel’s close, Hester is convinced that “a new truth would be revealed” where “sacred love” rather than legalistic marriage “should make us happy”. Her spirit has not been broken, she has not repented of her sin, and her perspective has not fallen into line with Biblical law as interpreted by the Puritans. Ultimately, “the scarlet letter had not done its office”.



Pearl - Pearl is seen as the living embodiment of the scarlet letter and she assumes a symbolic role for much of the novel. Symbolically, she holds her mother's sin perpetually in front of her and Hester dresses her in red in recognition of this function of Pearl's existence. Her lawlessness, her wickedness, and her refusal to recognise theocratic teaching present her as the "offshoot of a passionate moment" and amplify the Puritan belief that nothing good can come from a sinful liaison.

Pearl is most at home in the forest, a place of moral lawlessness outside Puritan control, somewhere where the "black man" walks and where danger lurks. But Pearl, a child of nature, finds the forest to be a "playmate" which "welcome[s] her...into its bosom". The forest reaches out to her and offers of itself, plants, birds, and animals instinctively recognising her. The child of sin is acknowledged as the offspring of a natural passion and as such the "wild things...recognized a kindred wildness in the human child". It is indeed significant that the Puritans consider the forest as a place of sin and it is here that Pearl, the "product of sin", is most at home.

The development of Hester - Throughout the novel, Hester embodies many often contradictory roles. Her symbolic role is determined by the Puritan fathers when they decree that she will "become the general symbol at which the preacher and moralist might point", and the community accordingly views her as "the figure, the body, the reality of sin". It is not until her charitable works allow her a level of public admiration that her community gradually adapts the meaning of the "A" and she becomes viewed as "Able". In being able to effect a change in the meaning of the scarlet letter, so Hester removes its punishment. Once it is no longer recognised as symbolising "Adulteress", the stigma of the "A" is lost.

However, Hester is viewed from other perspectives too. She is a maternal figure who, while often fearing her child's malevolence, is loyal and determined to exercise her parental responsibilities. Her actions in the Governor's Hall show her at her most defiant and strong-minded, when she determines that Pearl's interests are best served by being brought up by her own mother and refuses to submit to the patriarchal hierarchy.

She also embodies the roles of feminist and rationalist in her maverick interpretation of community life. She views the patricentric establishment as corrupt and envisages that this system of society needs to be torn down and "built up anew" before women assume a more "fair and suitable position". In imagining such a society, one built upon common admiration, equality, and understanding, Hester attacks the very foundations of the theocratic patriarchy upon which New England Puritanism was built.

Hester also presents as a nonconformist in her belief in the sacredness of the love she shared with Dimmesdale. Rather than be cowed by puritanical denunciations of a crime she committed in contravention of Biblical commands, she believes that the naturalness of their union has a "consecration of its own" that will be recognised in heaven, "bring[ing] them together before the bar of final judgement". She believes that a "new truth" will be established where "sacred love" will establish the relations between male and female "on a surer ground of mutual happiness". To Hester, true love based on mutual respect and equality is more sanctified than the legalistic, patriarchal idea of love adhered to by the Puritans.

The narrator - as a figure distinct from Hawthorne, the unnamed narrator explains his rationale for writing *The Scarlet Letter* in *The Custom House*, where he details his



discovery of the “badge of sin” and the Surveyor’s official record of events.

The narrator is characterised throughout by his ambiguity, narrative evasions, and commentaries on characters, themes and events. He is used by Hawthorne to shape the reader’s responses and encourage moral judgements by providing theories from which the reader can choose. Typical prevarication can be seen, for example, in his narrative of Dimmesdale’s revelation at the final scaffold scene. The narrator informs the reader that “many of the spectators testified to having seen on the breast of the unhappy minister a scarlet letter” but offers three possibilities for the mark’s appearance - Dimmesdale’s self-mutilation, Chillingworth’s nefarious magic, or guilt which gnawed “from the innermost heart outwardly”. In typically ambivalent fashion, he completes the account by stating that the “reader may choose among these theories”. Having thus encouraged the reader to make a choice, he undercuts any decision made by adding in the following paragraph that many people “denied that there was any mark whatever on his [Dimmesdale’s] breast.” Thus the reader is left without certainties or answers about what actually happened.

Use of imagery: Hawthorne makes use of a wide variety of imagery in *The Scarlet Letter*. The following are only a few examples:

The wild rose bush in chapter one is delicate, fragrant and fragile and, by offering the prisoner a sense that “the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to him”, contrasts the stringency of the Puritan regime with the unrestricted world of nature. It is unsurprising that the imagery of the wild rose is later attached to Pearl, the child of nature, when she claims to Rev Wilson that “she had not been made at all, but had been plucked by her mother off the bush of wild roses.”

The forest: Puritan imagery of the forest is linked to darkness, lack of restraint and godlessness; it is the region of the “Black Man”, where people such as Mistress Hibbins leave the protection of the godly community to walk with the devil. Their view of the forest underlines their fears of its uninhibited freedom.

For Hester and Dimmesdale the forest represents a place of liberty and natural affection. The imagery is that of naturalness, transformation and freedom. Hester in the forest with Dimmesdale removes the symbols of Puritan repression - her scarlet letter and her cap - and the result is the rejuvenation of her “youth, and the whole richness of her beauty” and the return of the “crimson flush” of her sexuality. In the forest, the love between Hester and Dimmesdale exists only within the laws of nature and has its own purity and integrity. It is said that upon the return of Hester’s feminine attractiveness, Nature responded “as with a sudden smile of heaven” and “forth burst the sunshine”. The imagery of sunlight would suggest that Nature reacts approvingly to the revitalisation of the true and natural love between Hester and Dimmesdale.

For Pearl, the child of nature, the forest is a place where she finds her affinity. Here she is associated with light, innocence and beauty. She plays in the sunshine, adorns herself with flowers and appears as an “infant dryad”, a beautiful goddess of nature. She is portrayed as “worthy of being brought forth in Eden” and exemplifies the prelapsarian innocence of Adam and Eve. In the forest, rather than being representative of sin, she is the image of purity, an embodiment of her parents’ true love.

Hester reflected in the armour in the Governor’s Hall - the imagery of this scene reflects the situation of Hester throughout the novel. In the iron grip of Puritanical



power, where men will decide her fate, she is dwarfed by the exaggerated letter A, and her individuality, her personality, and her appearance are hidden behind it. She is defined by the emblem she must wear.

Use of allegory: an allegory is a complete narrative in which the characters and events are symbols that stand for ideas about human life or for a political or historical situation. *The Scarlet Letter* has many allegorical elements. The following are just a few examples:

The effects of sin link the main characters as allegorical figures. Dimmesdale is seen as allegorical of the destructive effects of sin and hypocrisy. Chillingworth is consumed by revenge and his descent into evil and subsequent inhumanity is allegorical of the effects of devotion to sinful processes. The Puritans attempt to remove Hester's individuality and make her a living allegory representative of adultery and sin.

Structure: The three scaffold scenes around which the novel is structured relate to the book's central concerns of sin and punishment. The question in the first scene is whether sin should be made public and publicly punished; the second scene marks Dimmesdale's abortive impulse to publicly declare his sin; and the final scene sees Dimmesdale's confession and the sorrowful kiss from Pearl - the "child of sin" recognising her father as he has recognised her.



A03

In this examination, the candidate should demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which a novel is written and received by drawing on appropriate information from outside the novel.

No particular type of context will be stipulated in the question. However, contextual information which is made relevant to the key terms of the question will be rewarded. Students should be aware that little credit can be given for contextual information that is introduced merely for its own sake. They should remember that the text has primacy over the context. A good response will use contextual information sparingly and judiciously.

The following information is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but is intended as a helpful guide to teachers and students. It reflects some of the contextual areas which might be found useful. Remember the remarks above about balancing text and context in a response.

The nature of the heroine- The heroine tends to exhibit natural self-assurance. She is willing to question, and if necessary defy, patriarchal authority and she often possesses independence of thought and an individualism uncommon in the society in which she lives. She is seen to be courageous, steadfast and moral, following the dictates of her heart and her conscience against social and community edicts. However, she may equally be likely to respect her duties to family and husband, and in many cases will present as a tirelessly patient and self-sacrificing wife, balancing her own sense of self with the demands of society. The above is an attempt to define some of the features of a heroine. The student should attempt his/her own definition.

The symbolist novel - a novel where the main significance of characters, situations and action is symbolic rather than realistic, e.g. Chillingworth as symbolic of the destructive effects of vengefulness; Hester as symbolic of “adulteress”; Pearl as symbolic of sin; the forest as symbolic of godlessness and sexual freedom; the jailhouse as symbolic of Puritan repression; forest walks as symbolic of escaping Puritan control.

Gender inequality and women’s rights - the Puritans held traditional beliefs about male and female roles. The women in Puritan society fulfilled a variety of roles but were generally excluded from the legislative process and from being community leaders or ministers. One of the most important roles for women was that of wife and mother. Women were expected to look after their husbands, to provide food and a well-kept house, and to produce children and bring them up in the ways of church doctrine. Hester may be on the verge of developing a new role, as a counsellor of her fellow-women.

By emphasising their roles within society and family, the Puritans were able to strengthen their community’s religious and social foundations. Through communal work and engaging in creative pursuits, the individual was able to demonstrate his or her worth to the community. Thus a woman could serve a valuable purpose in God’s Divine Plan, and could achieve a modicum of individuality, by serving God and the whole community effectively.



The “American Dream” - was originally a dream of a classless society which promoted religious freedom, self-improvement and a moral, God-fearing, and harmonious community. Ralph Waldo Emerson considered the dream as being founded on the three principles of individualism, self-reliance and hard work. Today the dream still promises fresh starts, new opportunities, freedom and optimism but is often reduced to the gaining of fortune and fame.



A05: Argument and interpretation

In this examination, the candidate should offer opinion or judgment in response to the given reading of the text, taking account of the key terms as the basis of the argument. This AO is the driver of Unit AS 2 and is of primary importance.

A05 can be satisfied in full by the candidate developing his/her own reading in response to the given reading. If, however, critics are used, they must be:

- *used with understanding*
- *incorporated into the argument to reinforce or be seen as an alternative to the student's opinion*
- *not used as a substitute for the development of the student's own opinion*
- *properly acknowledged.*

Coherence and relevance of argument will be rewarded. Students should be aware of the importance of planning in the sequencing, development and illustration of the reading they wish to put forward. They should also beware of the danger of replacing the key terms of the question with others of their own choosing which they assume mean much the same thing.

It might also be helpful to note that in the predecessor of this unit examiners frequently regretted the sacrifice of quality to quantity in responses.

The following information is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but is intended as a starting point for teachers and students. It reflects some of the thematic, stylistic and contextual issues which may be explored and developed further both in the classroom and through teachers' and students' own independent research.

Specimen question:

The Scarlet Letter is little more than a criticism of attitudes to women.

With reference to the narrative methods used in the novel, and relevant contextual information, **show to what extent** you agree with the above statement.

In order to construct a meaningful and cogent argument (and to move beyond making simple assertions and offering unsupported opinions) students should use A02 and A03 elements to support and enhance their point of view. Convincing arguments will be based on a secure understanding of how Hawthorne has used narrative methods (A02) to convey his message. Students will also encounter difficulties in presenting an argument which is focused on the stimulus statement without knowledge of the context(s) in which the novel is written and received (A03).

Some relevant contextual points are listed below. These will enable the student to establish a basis for his/her argument, and can then be matched with the novel itself and the narrative methods which Hawthorne uses.

- demonstrate awareness of attitudes to women in seventeenth-century society: a patricentric society where women were subordinate to men; Biblical basis of man's superiority - woman created by God from man's rib as man's companion; Eve



viewed as temptress of Adam and a subsequent fear of female sexuality as the undoing of men; fear and stigmatization of unmarried women - spinsters, witches, hags; but women valued in caring roles as housewives, mothers, nurses

- Puritan attitudes to law and community came from sincerely meant interpretation of the scriptures. But their fear of sin and their belief in the constant battle between God and the Devil led them to be repressive and harsh. Hawthorne describes the Puritan leaders at Hester's trial as "good men, just and sage" but notes their incapacity to judge the thoughts of a woman: "Out of the whole human family, it would not have been easy to select the same number of wise and virtuous persons, who should be less capable of sitting in judgment on an erring woman's heart". Is this a criticism of the narrowness of perspective and experience of a patriarchal leadership?
- No one attitude is likely to be uniform within a society: the Puritan goodwives' attitudes to Hester on the platform are more unforgiving than those of the male judiciary. Contrast the matrons' view with that of the "young wife", who may be more likely to have understood Hester's predicament relating to passion, love and motherhood
- demonization of the "fallen woman" - Hester as social outcast; descriptions of the supernatural associations of the scarlet letter e.g. the "lurid glow" that it was said to cast
- changing perspectives about Hester from the townspeople - adulterous, able, angel - show that she is accepted by the end of the novel. However to be thus treated she has had to appear penitential in dress, demeanour and attitude throughout the novel. Her thoughts concerning equality and individualism have by necessity been private thoughts only, thus underlining Puritan unwillingness to accept freedom of thought from females
- admiration of Hester: her maternal strength in the Governor's house when she defends her right to keep and care for Pearl against the Puritan hierarchy; her vigour in the forest as she seeks to help Dimmesdale; the honesty of her heart-felt love for Dimmesdale throughout the novel.
- criticism of male characters - Dimmesdale as hypocritical and weak, contrasted with Hester's strength; Chillingworth sacrificing his humanity in his evil quest. Hawthorne's methods to portray this criticism?
- there could be room in the argument for a reminder that Hawthorne was writing in the nineteenth century, and that a critique of the attitudes to women prevalent in his own times may be sought here.

Other contextual areas/information will of course be accepted provided relevance is demonstrated.

A good response will take account of some of the above, showing the narrative methods used by Hawthorne. It is not necessary for the student wholly to agree or disagree with the stimulus statement. Probably a qualified answer will emerge. Such a response, for example might claim that while a criticism of attitudes to women is at the heart of the novel, Hawthorne is interested in the damaging effects of a repressive regime on people in general, not just women.



Glossary

Allegory
Allusion
Ambiguity
Ambivalence
Imagery
Irony
Non-conformism
Pre-lapsarian
Rationalism
Symbolism

Links

Classic Criticism

Yvor Winters: <https://www.unz.org/Pub/AmericanRev-1937sep-00339>
DH Lawrence: <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/lawrence/dhlch07.htm>
Henry James: <http://www.eldritchpress.org/nh/nhhj5.html>

Video (this site requires a license)

Women in Puritan society

<http://study.com/academy/lesson/women-in-puritan-society-roles-rights.html>

Puritans in America: Beliefs, religion, history

<http://study.com/academy/lesson/puritans-in-america-beliefs-religion-history.html>

