

AP English Language and Composition
Winter Reading: *The Scarlet Letter*

Overall

What is the overall argument Hawthorne makes in the novel? What is the “sweet moral blossom” referred to in Chapter 1 as it is revealed by the end of the novel?

How does Hawthorne use setting to support this argument?

Consider the lay-out of the market-place (where the scaffold is) and also the larger town, including governor’s mansion and buildings on the fringe of town. Draw the opening scaffold scene, to give a sense of the spatial relations and symbolism.

Consider the role of the town vs. the country.

Consider the use of spatial relations in the first scaffold scene and elsewhere. What is up? What is down?

How does Hawthorne use images from nature to support this argument?

How does Hawthorne use light and dark imagery to support this argument?

Consider the prison vs. the market-place.

Consider mentions of light and dark, e.g., “A blessing on the righteous Colony of the Massachusetts, where iniquity is dragged out into the sunshine!” (49).

Consider the play of light and dark in the woods.

How does Hawthorne use what is hidden and what is known to support this argument?

Consider Dimmesdale initial appeal to Hester about the difficulties of bearing guilt secretly.

Consider the very public nature of Hester’s punishment and the way the language of the text treats it.

Consider the plot—What secrets does the reader know? What is the effect of having Dimmesdale revealed as Pearl’s father later in the book, rather than known all along (dramatic irony).

What is the effect of the secrecy surrounding Roger Chillingworth’s status and the nature of his revenge?

Consider the role of the woods in this dynamic.

How does Hawthorne use a split between intellect and emotion to support this argument?

How does he set forth this split (see also “The Custom House”)? Which side does he favor? How do you know?

How does Hawthorne use the archetype of death and rebirth to support this argument?

Consider the scaffold scenes as loci of symbolic death and rebirth.

Consider other moments that effect real change in characters—sometimes the birth is of a true self, sometimes a false self. How does it work?

How does Hawthorne use multiple perspectives to support this argument?

Consider the places where members of the crowd speak. With whom are we meant to sympathize? Who is depicted unsympathetically?

Consider the places where he expresses multiple disagreeing views of a public scene.

How does Hawthorne use diction and poetic devices to support this argument?

Consider, for example, the 4+ words in the text that mean “face.”

Consider words that find much repetition, e.g., “ignominy,” “heart,” and others.

Consider the kinds of words and comparisons Hawthorne repeatedly makes that associate with different characters, for example, witchy words for Pearl.

Consider the use of litotes, other kinds of understatement, and verbal irony as factors affecting tone.

How does Hawthorne use biblical and religious imagery and allusions to support this argument?

Hester depicted as the Virgin Mary (!)

Pearl’s name

Other local references (“infernial pit” [62])

How does Hawthorne use symbolism to support this argument?

Consider the rose-bush, the prison-door, the letter itself, etc.

Consider the alignment between the A and Pearl, depicted from the very beginning of the novel.

Consider Pearl as a symbol.

How does Hawthorne use physical traits of characters to support this argument?

Consider not only the physical deformity of Roger Chillingworth but also Hester’s youth and beauty and physical traits associated with Dimmesdale and others as appropriate.

How does Hawthorne use supernatural elements to support this argument?

Consider imagery (“lurid gleam” [62]) associated with the letter.

Consider the role of the Black Man (devil), Mistress Hibbins (witch), and witchcraft.

Consider the Faust theme (a character makes a bargain with the devil and suffers unintended consequences, overtly mentioned on p. 69).

How can you use what you know about psychoanalytical criticism—i.e., the Freudian division of personality—to support this argument?

Consider the division of personality for each character.

Consider each main character as one aspect of personality.

How does Hawthorne use structure to support this argument?

Consider three possible approaches to structure.

J.C. Gerber

Part I (Chs. 1-8): the community instigates the action

Part II (Chs. 9-12): Chillingworth instigates the action

Part III (Chs. 13-19): Hester instigates the action

Part IV (Chs. 20-24): Dimmesdale instigates the action

Henry James and A.M. MacNamara

Stage I: Preparation (Chs. 1-16)

Stage II: Communication (Chs. 17-19)

Stage III: Transformation (Chs. 20-22)

Stage IV: Revelation (Ch. 23)

Breakdown by scaffold scenes:

Chs. 2 and 3

Ch. 12

Ch. 23