The Scarlet Letter
Bantam Classic (1986)
Nathaniel Hawthorne
Dasily Lasko

Summary:

The story starts during the summer of 1642, near Boston, Massachusetts, in a Puritan village. A young woman, named Hester Prynne is being punished for adultery by wearing a scarlet ‘A’ on her clothing. Hester's husband had sent her ahead to America ahead of him, however, her husband does not arrive in Boston and people believe he has been lost at sea. While waiting for her husband, Hester has an affair, resulting in the birth of her daughter, Pearl. She will not reveal her lover's identity, however, and the scarlet letter, along with her subsequent public shaming, is the punishment for her sin and secrecy. Hester's missing husband, who is now practicing medicine and calling himself Roger Chillingworth moves to town and reveals his true identity to Hester. He settles in Boston to practice medicine there under the condition that Hester will not reveal that he is her husband.

Several years pass and Hester supports herself by working as a seamstress though shunned by the community. Arthur Dimmesdale, a local minister in Hester’s town appears to be wasting away and suffers from mysterious heart trouble. Chillingworth moves in with him so that he can provide his patient with round-the-clock care. Chillingworth suspects that there may be a connection between the minister's torments and Hester's secret, and he begins to test Dimmesdale to see what he can learn. One night, when Pearl is about seven years old, she and her mother encounter Dimmesdale atop the town scaffold, trying to punish himself for his sins. Hester and Pearl join him, and the three link hands. The next day Hester and Pearl take a walk in the forest and they run into Dimmesdale, also on a stroll through the woods. Hester informs him of the true identity of Chillingworth. The former lovers decide to flee to Europe in four days, where they can live with Pearl as a family. Later, Hester finds out that Chillingworth knows of their plan and has booked passage on the same ship. Then Dimmesdale impulsively mounts the scaffold with
his lover and his daughter, and confesses publicly, exposing the mark supposedly seared into the flesh of his chest. He falls dead. Frustrated in his revenge, Chillingworth dies a year later. Hester and Pearl leave Boston. Many years later, Hester returns alone, still wearing the scarlet letter, to live in her old cottage and resumes her charitable work. When Hester dies, she is buried with the tombstone decorated with a letter “A.”

Organizational Patterns:

The story is split into chapters, but in a bigger sense there are three distinct dates that it covers: the summer when Hester is accused, a few years later when Dimmesdale confesses, years after that when Hester returns still wearing the ‘A’. Also there is an introduction called “The Custom-House” which discusses why the narrator is writing this story and how he found it.

Enduring Question:

How do others’ labels affect our own self-acceptance?
Should we allow others’ labels to affect our own self-acceptance?

Background Knowledge:

Students in today’s world will need to understand the cultural beliefs of the Puritans in the 1600s in order for them to better understand why Hester was punished for adultery so harshly and how truly shunned she would be by the community. Student will need to understand Puritan justice. Also, students would need to understand the importance of religion within the Puritan community and the expectations that would be placed on a Puritan minister to find depth in the character of Arthur Dimmesdale. Also, students could benefit from understanding Hawthorn’s familiar background and desire to make restitution for his grandfather’s mistakes especially when discussing “The Custom-House.”

Themes:

The enduring question throughout the unit explores one of the major themes of *The Scarlet Letter* which is the role that guilt plays within the different characters. Dimmesdale appears to suffer even more than Hester because he lets the guilt fester within him. Additionally, Chillingworth does not lead a full life because of his searching for revenge and hiding his true identity. Hester, however, acknowledges her sin publicly and does not hide with her guilt, but accepts herself which allows her to help others and live her life to the fullest. This also can be tied into identity as well as self-acceptance.

Along with this idea of self-acceptance, *The Scarlet Letter* deals with many different labels and the affect of judgment of the community on the character. Dimmesdale hides from the judgment and when he does finally publicly admit his guilt he dies. Hester,
however, must where an ‘A’ so that no matter where she goes people will automatically judge her as an adulteress. The labels in the story affect the character depending on how they handle the judgment of others. There are also multiple labels placed within the story such as the submission of woman within the Puritan culture and the lack of feminism.

The nature of evil is also a major theme of the novel. Is Hester evil because she committed adultery? Does her kind actions redeem her in some way? Is the Puritan community evil for judging her so harshly? Is Dimmesdale the truly evil one because he lives a life of lies and hypocrisy? Or is Chillingsworth evil or justified in his need for revenge? The book explores the definition of evil and whether is defined through our actions or our thoughts.

Setting:

The location of this story is in a small Puritan community just outside of Boston Massachussetts in the 1600s. Students would need to understand the nature of American during this time which allowed for the Puritan societies to rule by religious beliefs as well as the background knowledge concerning Puritan beliefs and societies that were common during this era in history.

Point of View:

The story is told from a third person perspective which is discussed in “The Custom-house.” The nameless narrator stumbled onto the story in the Salem Custom-house when he finds Hester’s ‘A’ and a manuscript. The narrator then proceeds to tell a fictional version based on the historical manuscript. While the narrator never changes, the narrator discusses different characters and doesn't always immediately give all information to the reader.

Characterization:

Hester Prynne

The reader knows little about Hester prior to her affair with Dimmesdale and the birth of her daughter, Pearl. The reader can infer that Hester married Chillingworth although she did not love him, but it is never fully understood why. Prior to her marriage, Hester was a strong-willed and impulsive young woman. But after Hester’s affair, she is alienated from the rest of the community, which makes Hester more contemplative about deeper thoughts such as morality and
social organizations. Hester also becomes a compassionate maternal figure as a result of her experiences such as caring for her daughter as well as the poor. By the novel’s end, Hester no longer attaches shame with her scarlet letter and many other women in her community no longer associate it as an emblem of shame either. 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.

“But, in the lapse of toilsome, thoughtful and self-devoted years that made up Hester’s life, the scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world’s scorn and bitterness, and became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too. And, as Hester Prynne had no selfish ends, nor lived in any measure for her own profit and enjoyment, people brought all their sorrows and perplexities, and besought her counsel, as one who herself had gone through a mighty trouble.” (pg 247)

Roger Chillingworth
As his name suggests, Roger Chillingworth is a man who chills the soul. His body is twisted, stooped, deformed shoulders similar to his character in the novel. 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 becomes the doctor of the town, using them for his own twisted purposes. Ultimately, Chillingworth represents evil. He is interested in revenge, not justice, and he seeks the deliberate destruction of others rather than a restitution of wrongs. His desire to hurt others stands in contrast to Hester and Dimmesdale’s sin, which had love, not hate, as its intent. The result of Pearl and their public shame that may have come from the young lovers’ deed was not their purpose, whereas Chillingworth reaps deliberate harm.

“In a word, old Roger Chillingworth was striking evidence of man’s faculty transforming himself into a devil, if he will only, for a reasonable space of time, undertake a devil’s office. This unhappy person had effected such a transformation by devoting himself, for seven years, to the constant analysis of a heart full of torture, and deriving his enjoyment thence, and adding fuel to those fiery tortures which he analyzed and gloated over.” (pg 158)

Arthur Dimmesdale
Arthur Dimmesdale was a scholar of some renown at and English university. His past suggests that he is probably somewhat aloof and kept to himself before his shameful secret. However, Dimmesdale has an unusually active conscience. The fact that Hester takes all of the blame for their shared sin eats away at him and results in severe mental anguish and physical weakness. However, in the town he is known as an eloquent and emotionally powerful speaker and a compassionate leader, and his congregation is able to receive meaningful spiritual guidance from him. However, through his sermons Dimmesdale sends out coded messages about personal guilt that he suffers from, but his congregation refuses to decode those messages. 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.

“Notwithstanding his high native gifts and scholar-like attainments, there was an air about this young minister,—an apprehensive, a started, a half-frightened look,—as of being who felt himself quite astray and at a loss in the pathway of human existence, and could only be at ease in some seclusion of his own.” (pg 61)

**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.

“In the little chaos of Pearl’s character, there might be seen emerging—and could have been, from the very first—the stedfast principles of an unflinching courage—an uncontrollable will—a sturdy pride, which might be disciplined into a self-respect—and a bitter scorn of many things, which, when examined might be found to have the taint of falsehood in them. She possessed affections, too, though hitherto acrid and disagreeable, as are the richest flavors of an unripe fruit.” (pg 168)

**Literary Terms:**

- Setting (a reflection of culture)
- Character Traits
- Irony
- Symbolism

**Affective Issues:**

*The Scarlet Letter* is a novel that students may not directly find connections while reading the text without a little prompting from the teacher because students are so far removed historically and culturally from the novel. However, with some guidance, students can find connections with Hester in her isolation from the community, being judged by other people despite trying to change and being rejected while still finding self-acceptance. I think that within the character of Dimmesdale students can connect with his
life of secrecy and feeling like he wears a mask in public essentially becoming two different people. Finally with pearl, I think that students can find connection with a girl who has been abandoned or rejected by her father and grows up in a single parent home.

**Vocabulary:**
Hawthorne uses words that will not be very familiar to students such as sagacity, besom, ignominion, and preternaturally. I think with this book it might be a good idea to have students create their own vocabulary lists as they go throughout the book to encourage them to look up words that they do not know or cannot decipher the definition through context clues. Additionally, this might be a good book to discuss inference because Hawthorne also uses words in a more archaic way that students may not be familiar with, but after examining the sentence or paragraph more closely may be able to conclude the meaning on their own.

**Implications for Student Diversity:**
Since this novel is a little more complex in its ideas and sentence structure for students with disabilities (as well as the rest of the class) may benefit from scaffolded notes or a course organizer which will help them be on the look out for specific themes or characters as they read so it will not be so laborious to go back through the book for assignments. Additionally, I think having students pick a character to write a journal about as they read may help them find them become very familiar with a certain character which could help them write a test essay question later on. Also, the book deals with religion which should be handled carefully and objectively in discussion and the teacher should never assume that a student understand the basics of the Puritan religion. Additionally, some students may not have been raised in this country and have not been exposed to American history as much so teachers should expect to cover the basics of early American life in the 1600s. Teachers might also consider using pre-assessment about the Puritans.
Gender Issues:
This novel is about male dominated society which subjugates women. Hester is subject to this treatment and stands up against societal norms for women within the book. Additionally, Hester becomes a maternal figure within the book as she raises her daughter Pearl and extends her love and caring to the community as a whole. Also, Hester is caught in her adultery because she is the woman in the relationship and gets pregnant while Dimmesdale can get away with hiding his secrets from the world. Gender issues would be a subject raised when discussing the culture of the Puritan society and addressed in background knowledge that students should have before reading the novel which will help prepare them for more in depth discussion on gender roles as the book continues.

Research Issues:
Beyond a normal test assessment at the end of the novel, students could form groups of 4 or 5 and make a 7-10 minute video acting out major/important scenes in the book. With the completed movie, students would also turn in a paper justifying the importance of the scenes they chose. Other ideas include having students present mini oral presentations about the time period of the novel, the author or cultural information or having students compare the style and diction of *The Scarlet Letter* (in which the narrator claims to be nonfiction) and a nonfiction article about the Puritan time period.

Enrichment Resources:
The Scarlet Letter has been adapted into film, specifically the 1995 version and the 2010 modern twist titled *Easy A*. The punk band As Blood Runs Black wrote a song entitled Hester Prynne and a band name Mystery Dope also wrote a song titled “The Ballad of Hester Prynne.” Additionally, a band called the Obliques wrote a song summarizing the plot of *The Scarlet Letter* titled “The Scarlet Letter Spark Tune.” There was a rock opera title *shAme* based on the novel.

Other resources that could be used in conjunction with *The Scarlet Letter* includes the short story “Young Goodman Brown” by Nathaniel Hawthorne which would be a good introduction into Hawthorne’s prose as well as the Puritan setting. Having
students read a short biography about Hawthorne and his association with his great-great-great-grandfather might also be helpful to students. The poem by Dunbar titled "We Wear the Mask" might help spark an interesting discussion or free write about the mask that Dimmesdale wears as well as masks that students wear in their own lives. Also the picture book You Are Special by Max Lucado might help students solidify the cruelty of labeling people and also encourage them to accept themselves despite what other people label them as.

"Hester Prynne"
As Blood Runs Black
Your vision of a new life was impure
gave into temptation and threw away what you believed
your immaculate state of mind was only temporary
your faults your flaws got the best of you

your commitment, your pledge to another human being
was destroyed through curiosity
your goal in life is far out of reach
you'll find yourself out of luck

branded into your chest - domestic livestock
society kept track of your defiance
branded into your chest - domestic livestock

terror embedded into your thick mind
bearing your emblem with pride
plagued by its purpose in genesis
subsequently flaunting its meaning

your vision of a new life was impure
gave into temptation and threw away what you believed

infestation

roc-a-way

your immaculate state of mind was only temporary
your faults your flaws got the best of you

your guard was let down
your past turned against you
**The Scarlet Letter**  
Bantam Classic, New York, 1986  
Short Story Introduction

**Context:**  
This activity is to be used as a pre-reading or frontload activity before students have begun reading. Specifically, this instructional routine is meant to help students access their previous knowledge about the Puritans while building on it in preparation for reading the novel *The Scarlet Letter* which is set in Puritan times.

**Statement of Purpose:**  
This activity is meant to set up background knowledge of the Puritan beliefs and time period while introducing students to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s writing style in hopes that they will feel more comfortable with his style as they begin reading *The Scarlet Letter*. By using this instructional routine, students will be given tools to make text-to-text connections. Specifically, “Young Goodman Brown” will help students recognize how reading other sources that are connected to a similar topic or setting can provide deeper insight to the text they are reading. Additionally, this will expose students to two different texts written by the same author which can also help them create text-to-text connections which enhance their understanding of the novel as well.

**Directions:**

- **Main Idea:** Students will read “Young Goodman Brown” in small groups and write a paragraph/list as a group about characteristics of Puritan society they learn from the short story.
- **Materials Needed:**  
  - Copies of “Young Goodman Brown” for every student  
  - Blank papers for each group  
- **Time:** 45-60 minutes

**STEP ONE:**  
Split students into groups of 4 and pass out the copies of “Young Goodman Brown.” Tell students to rotate reading between the four people in the group until they finish the story. The person with the lightest color of hair reads first and rotates clockwise after that.

**STEP TWO:**  
As they are reading have students create a list of all the characteristics of the Puritans that they discover from the short story.

**STEP THREE:**  
Come together as a class and have each group share their list. Make a list on the chalkboard of the important characteristics of the Puritans they concluded from the short story. Answers could include: strict moral code, judgment of peers, putting their best face forward, religion/government coincide, superstitious, predestination.
Assessment:

The group papers that will be turned in for grading, the class discussion of characteristics of the Puritans, and observation of the groups working together will provide opportunities to assess whether students are understanding the main characteristics of Puritans. Additionally, a class discussion the following class period after students have read the first section of *The Scarlet Letter* concerning Hawthorne’s style might be more effective than when students have only read “Young Goodman Brown” which would assess their opinions and understanding of Hawthorne’s style.
Context:
This strategy would be introduced after the students have read the first section of the novel so they have already been introduced to the main characters which will help them pick one character to follow throughout the rest of the novel. The students will turn the journal in at the end of the unit.

Statement of Purpose:
In this unit, I would like to focus on character development and how they can learn lessons from the characters and apply them to their own lives. A character journal helps students focus on one character and acknowledge different ways the text gives them information about the characters and how their own experiences affect how they perceive the characters. The entries they make in this journal are thoughts, connections and reactions that they will continue to use in other novels they read to help them better understand and analyze characters.

Directions:
Main Idea: Students will write at least three journal entries per assigned reading about one main character of their choice. Students will choose from a list of journal entry options such as: personal reaction, new and important information about the character, prediction, labels society gives this character, disagreement you have with the character, questions you have about the character. Each entry must have a page number, quote and commentary. The more entries students write the more it will help them in their final project for the unit so it is better if they write more than three.

Materials Needed:
Assignment sheet
Notebooks/blank papers

Time: Entire unit

STEP ONE:
Have a class discussion about each main character in the novel (Hester, Chillingworth, Dimmesdale, Pearl). Write the characteristics they have learned in the reading about each character on the board. Pass out an assignment sheet (which should include different strategies you would like students to use such as predictions, quote analysis, personal connection, etc.) to each student and if there is enough class money also pass out notebooks. Students can also just use blank sheets of paper and staple them together.
**STEP TWO:**

Have students pick one character (refer to the characteristics on the board to help them) and then give them time to go back through last nights’ reading and make three entries about the character following the assignment sheet.

**STEP THREE:**

Students will take home their character journals each night and bring them to back to every class period with at least three entries filled in. Have students be prepared to have their journal open on their desks to be checked each day during an activity like silent reading.

**STEP FOUR:**

Students will use their character journals to do their final projects and then turn them in with their final project.

**Assessment:**

The character journals will be turned in at the end of the unit, but each day students will have their journals open to their last entries laying on the desk for the teacher to check off their entries and maybe do a quick read to make sure they are understanding the assignment.
The Scarlet Letter
Bantam Classic, New York, 1986
Body Biography

Context:
This will be used as a final assessment after finishing the novel.

Statement of Purpose:
The emphasis in this unit is character development and many of the activities and lessons will revolve around the characters and students' analysis of them. The body biography is the perfect assignment to show students' perception, interpretation and understanding of the main characters as well as providing a platform to tie in the enduring theme of labels and self-acceptance. Additionally, the novel is heavily filled with symbols which can also be used in the body biographies as they have to use symbols to represent the character in the picture and explain those symbols in a reflection turned in with the assignment.

Directions:
Main Idea: In groups of three, students create a drawing of a main character of their choice. Each section of their body must represent their motivations, the perception others have of them, important actions in the story, etc. There will only be one quote and the name of the character written on the drawing the rest of the body parts must be drawn to represent personality traits or important events in the character's life.

Materials Needed:
Large sheets of butcher paper for each group
Markers/crayons
Access to computer

Time: 60-80 minutes (can be split over multiple class periods)

STEP ONE:
Split students into groups of three according to the character they have chosen to follow throughout the novel. If the students do not evenly split into groups three according to their character choice, then groups can choose which character they will draw. Students are free to use the text as well as their character journals to create the body biographies.

STEP TWO:
Hand out the Body Biography assignment sheet to the students which should include a list of topics about the character each drawing should represent and each paper should address. For this unit, I would ask students to make sure each drawing included a representation of how society perceives them (their labels), how society’s labels affect their own view of themselves, and what their actions say about them.

STEP THREE:
Give each student a large piece of butcher paper and have them trace one member of their group on the paper. Have access to markers and crayons for students to draw their
character. Give students time to work on the assignment in groups. Additionally, give them time to write their papers on the computer explaining and reflecting on what each body part represents and why.

STEP FOUR:
Have students present their body biographies to the class and hang them around (or outside the room).

Assessment:
The students will present their body biographies to the class as well as turn in an attached reflection with explanations and analysis about each representative body part. Do their choices accurately depict their character? Do their symbols represent a deeper side to the character and not just the obvious? Does their reflection (and symbols chosen) show that they have truly evaluated, analyzed and synthesized the text and their chosen character?
Context:
This lesson should be taught earlier in the unit so students can use their knowledge of words roots to help them make educated guesses about the vocabulary in the novel. It can be taught before reading the novel or during the first few reading assignments.

Statement of Purpose:
The Scarlet Letter has an extensive vocabulary that would be impossible to fully represent in a vocabulary list. Additionally, The Scarlet Letter uses many Tier III words that students may never see again outside this novel, but may need to understand in order to comprehend the novel. Word roots are an excellent tool that students can use in any reading situation, but also while reading this specific novel. While the state core outlines an entire list of word roots for each grade to know, for this unit I would focus on only six.

Directions:
Main Idea: Students will be given six Greek/Latin word roots that students must memorize definitions and how to find them in other words.

Materials needed:
Index cards
Chalkboard/chalk

Time: 20-30 minutes

STEP ONE:
Write the following on the roots on the overhead projector: cracy, demo, fid, phil, sym and vita. Have students guess what each one means. Write the definition next to the word root. Then ask students to think of words that have this word root. With each example have students explain how the definition of the word fits with the root it has.

STEP TWO:
Hand out a sheet with each word root, their definitions and examples for students to put in their notes.

STEP THREE:
Pass out six index cards for students to create their own flash cards of the word roots. In pairs, have students quiz each other and use different examples of the words.
STEP FOUR:
As students are reading the book, have them find ten words that are based off one of the six word roots. Have them write it in the character journals along with an analysis of how the word root fits in with the definition of the word.

Assessment:
Through class discussion and the flash cards, teachers can observe if students are understanding the word roots and identifying accurate words that have those word roots. Additionally, having students find them in their novel and record them in their journal as they read will help teachers assess students’ ability to apply the word roots in a (more) authentic situation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cracy</th>
<th>Greek</th>
<th>government, democracy, autocracy, aristocracy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>demo</td>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>people, democracy, demography, demonstrate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fid</td>
<td>Latin</td>
<td>faith, fidelity, confidence, confidante</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phil</td>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>Love, philosopher, philanthropy, bibliophile, philharmonic, Philadelphia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sym</td>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>together, sympathy, symbol, symmetry, symphony symposium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>Latin</td>
<td>life, Vitamin, vitality, vital, revitalize</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Scarlet Letter
Bantam Classic, New York, 1986
Silent Discussion

Context:
This is a strategy to use during the reading of the novel. For this specific example, students should have finished reading Chapters 14-16 in The Scarlet Letter.

Statement of Purpose:
This strategy allows for everyone to participate in a discussion about the characters of the novel as well as express their opinion about the nature of evil in an anonymous way before they speak up in front of the class about their opinion. Additionally, sometimes writing our thoughts about a question before we discuss them with others helps students form and develop a solid answer or opinion. This discussion format allows students time to think and write out their opinions before sharing them.

Directions:
Main Idea: Students will choose to answer two of four questions concerning the characters and themes of the novel on a small sticky note before discussing the questions as a class—using the sticky note comments as a building block for discussion.

Materials needed:
- Sticky notes
- Posters with questions written on them

Time: 20-30 minutes

STEP ONE:
Hang posters with the following questions on the board.
- Who is more evil: Hester or Chillingworth?
- Is evil shown in our actions or in our thoughts? Or both?
- Do people who are evil usually appear that way? If not, how do they appear?
- What is the definition of evil?

STEP TWO:
Pass out two sticky notes to every student in the classroom. Ask students to answer two of the questions with their sticky notes and then place them under the corresponding poster when they are done.

STEP THREE:
Go over each question as a class and the answers given. Ask students to defend their answers and build a discussion off of the comments.
Assessments

Although the sticky notes are anonymous, teachers can have students write initials if they would like more accountability. Observations and assessments of the students' answers in the discussion and on the sticky notes will help teachers recognize how deeply students are analyzing the characters/themes and tangling with the text.