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Norman Maine Publishing

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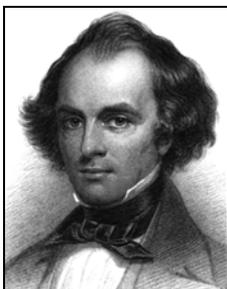
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The Scarlet Letter

CLASSIC. Adapted from the 1850 novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne. After having an affair with Rev. Dimmesdale and giving birth to his daughter, Hester Prynne is led to the town scaffold where she is publically shamed and is forced to wear a scarlet letter “A” on her chest. Rev. Dimmesdale, who does not have the courage to confess to the affair, becomes the target of revenge for Hester’s husband, who mercilessly torments Dimmesdale until he is overwhelmed with guilt and develops a heart condition. Alarmed at Dimmesdale’s rapid demise, Hester convinces him to sail to Europe with her and Pearl so that they can start a new life and become a family. But before they can flee Boston, Hester discovers that her husband has learned of her plan and has booked passage on the same ship.

Performance Time: Approximately 90-120 minutes.



Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1861

About the Story

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born in Salem, MA, in 1804. His family is descended from the earliest settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and includes John Hathorne, who was one of the judges at the 1692 Salem Witch Trials. Hawthorne added a “w” to his name when he became an author to distance himself from his great-great grandfather. *The Scarlet Letter* is considered to be Hawthorne’s greatest work. It depicts early American Puritan society, which was established by a group of religious reformers who arrived in Massachusetts in the 1630s under the leadership of John Winthrop. The death of John Winthrop is referenced in *The Scarlet Letter*. In addition, the character of Mistress Hibbins is based on Ann Hibbins, who was executed for witchcraft in Boston in 1656. The character of Governor Bellingham is based on Ann Hibbins’s brother, Richard Bellingham, who served as the governor of Massachusetts and later as deputy governor. At the time of publication in 1850, the topic of adultery was considered extremely risqué, but *The Scarlet Letter* became an instant bestseller and was one of the first mass-produced books in the United States at a time when books were hand-made. Some of Hawthorne’s most notable works include *The House of the Seven Gables* and his short stories “Feathertop” and “Young Goodman Brown.”

Characters

(7 M, 6 F, 1 flexible, extras)

HESTER PRYNNE: Intelligent, strong, thoughtful woman who has had an affair with the Rev. Dimmesdale resulting in the birth of his illegitimate daughter, Pearl; wears a dress with a scarlet embroidered "A" stitched in gold on her chest and a cape that covers her dress and a formal cap; female.

PEARL: Illegitimate daughter of Hester and Rev. Dimmesdale; wears a red dress; female.

REV. ARTHUR DIMMESDALE: Intelligent Puritan minister who will not confess to his affair with Hester or that Pearl is his illegitimate daughter; overwhelmed with guilt and torment, he develops a heart condition; wears a minister's robe; male.

ROGER CHILLINGWORTH: Hester's malevolent husband who has disguised himself as a doctor and has set out to wreak vengeance on Hester and Rev. Dimmesdale; much older than Hester and has a misshapen/deformed body, which gives him a monstrous appearance; wears a strange combination of traditional European clothing and Native-American garb; male.

GOVERNOR BELLINGHAM: Wealthy gentleman who is the governor of the Boston colony and lives in a luxurious mansion; male.

MISTRESS HIBBINS: Gov. Bellingham's sister, a widow, who ventures into the forest at night and is thought to be a witch; female.

SERVANT: Gov. Bellingham's servant; flexible.

REV. JOHN WILSON: Elder clergyman who preaches hellfire and damnation and advocates the harsh punishment of sinners; male.

BEADLE: Church official who ushers Hester to prison; male.

COMMANDER: Captain of a ship sailing to Europe; male.

COUNTRYWOMAN 1, 2, 3: Puritan women who pass harsh judgment on Hester; female.

TOWNSMAN: Puritan man who judges Hester less harshly than the Countrywomen; male.

EXTRAS: As Townspeople.

Costumes

Puritans wear dark earth-toned garments and gray steeple-crowned hats. Women wear hoods or are bareheaded.

Setting

1642-1649, Boston, a Puritan settlement.

Set

The sets can be as minimal or elaborate as your budget allows. A bare stage with minimum scenery/set pieces to suggest the settings is all that is required.

Boston marketplace. A crude scaffold stands at one end of the marketplace below the eaves of Boston's oldest church. A balcony from the meeting house hangs directly over the scaffold. The doors of wooden prison are present.

Prison. There is a mattress on the floor with a crate used as a crib, a wooden bench, and a chair next to it.

Hester's shabby cottage on the outskirts of town. There are two chairs. A forest backdrop can be used.

Governor Bellingham's mansion. Large grand wooden structure with a stucco-covered wall. There is a row of portraits depicting Bellingham male ancestors looking stern and peering down in judgment. There is a chair. A window that looks out to the garden is optional.

Rev. Dimmesdale's study. A dark, somber room with a window, which overlooks the church's graveyard. There are bookcases, a couch, a desk, a mirror on the wall or hand mirror, and a couple of chairs.

Church. There is a podium and benches or chairs.

Forest on the outskirts of town. A forest backdrop can be used.

Synopsis of Scenes

ACT I

Scene 1: Boston marketplace, late morning.

Scene 2: Prison, several days later, evening.

Scene 3: Hester's shabby cottage on the outskirts of town.

Scene 4: Forest path. Can be played in front of the curtain.

Scene 5: Governor Bellingham's mansion, a short while later.

Scene 6: Rev. Dimmesdale's study, several weeks later, afternoon.

Intermission

ACT II

Scene 1: Rev. Dimmesdale's study, several months later, late evening.

Scene 2: Church, the next day, late morning.

Scene 3: Forest on the edge of town, several days later, afternoon.

Scene 4: Dimmesdale's study, several hours later, afternoon.

Scene 5: Boston marketplace, two days later, late morning.

Props

Baby doll	Robe, for Dimmesdale
Baby crying	Lantern
Small leather case, for Chillingworth	Black glove, for Dimmesdale
Vials for potions	Bible
Cup of water	Embroidered scarlet letter
Needlepoint	“A” that can be pinned to Hester’s dress
Toys, for Pearl	Papers
Package with gloves inside	Pen and inkwell
Small well-worn duffle bag	Embroidered scarlet letter
Bundle of dried herbs	“A” that can be pinned to Dimmesdale’s chest
Glass of tea (for herbal drink)	

Special Effects

Solemn music

Dark, solemn music

Suspenseful music

Meteor in the sky that resembles the letter "A"

Church music

Military march

*"There is no path to guide us
out of this dismal maze."*

—Hester

ACT I

Scene I

(AT RISE: Boston marketplace, 1640s. Marketplace with the doors of wooden prison, late morning. A crude scaffold stands at one end of the marketplace below the eaves of Boston's oldest church and seems to be a permanent feature of the place. A balcony from the meeting house hangs directly over the scaffold. Darkness. Faint, solemn music is heard and then whispers fill the theatre. We can distinguish nothing at first from hissing sounds save the words, "sinner" and "adulteress." The whispers overlap and increase in volume. The lights go slowly up to reveal Townsmen wearing gray and dark earth-tone garments and gray steeple-crowned hats. Countrywomen, some wearing hoods and others bareheaded, are assembled in front of a wooden edifice, the door of which is heavily timbered with oak and studded with iron spikes. The whispers are heard as they wait.)

COUNTRYWOMAN 1: I'll give you a piece of my mind.
(Pause.) It would serve the public good if mature Christian ladies like us were allowed to deal with women like her. What do you say, ladies?

COUNTRYWOMAN 2: If the three of us passed judgment on this woman, would she have gotten off as lightly as she has before the magistrates? *(Pause.)* I don't think so.

COUNTRYWOMAN 3: People say that the Reverend Master Dimmesdale is very grieved that a scandal like this has occurred in his congregation.

COUNTRYWOMAN 1: You don't say... *(Pause.)* The magistrates may be God-fearing, but they are too merciful.

COUNTRYWOMAN 2: At the very least, they should have branded her forehead with a hot iron.

COUNTRYWOMAN 1: She would have winced then.

COUNTRYWOMAN 2: For sure.

COUNTRYWOMAN 3: Maybe she's innocent?

COUNTRYWOMAN 1: Innocent?! She's a dirty adulteress. What will she care if something is pinned to her dress? What kind of a sentence is that?

COUNTRYWOMAN 2: She could cover it with a brooch or some other sinful jewelry and walk the streets as proud as ever.

COUNTRYWOMAN 3: Even though she can cover the mark however she likes, it will still weigh on her heart.

COUNTRYWOMAN 1: Why talk about marks and brands, whether they're on her gown or the skin of her forehead? This woman has brought shame to us all, and she should be put to death.

COUNTRYWOMAN 2: Isn't there a law that says so?

COUNTRYWOMAN 1: There truly is...the Bible. The magistrates are to blame for disregarding the word of God.

TOWNSMAN: (*Overhearing.*) Have mercy...all of you. Are women only virtuous when they fear punishment?

COUNTRYWOMAN 2: (*Offended.*) Virtuous?! (*To Countrywoman 1, 3.*) What did he say?

COUNTRYWOMAN 1: Men are all the same. (*Angrily.*) I should give him a piece of my mind.

TOWNSMAN: Quiet now, you gossips. Here she comes now.

(As the Crowd watches and continues to gossip, Hester Prynne, a young woman holding an infant close to her bosom, emerges from the prison door and follows Beadle to the scaffold.)

BEADLE: Make way, good people, make way in the King's name! (*To Hester.*) Come along and show your scarlet letter in the marketplace.

(Hester climbs the steps to the scaffold. As she turns to face the Crowd, she opens her cape and reveals an embroidered badge on her chest, a letter "A" stitched in gold and scarlet.)

COUNTRYWOMAN 1: *(To other Countrywoman 2, 3.)* Well, she's certainly good with a needle, isn't she?

COUNTRYWOMAN 2: Look at her! I can't believe that she's parading her skill like a harlot today.

COUNTRYWOMAN 1: She's laughing in the faces of our godly magistrates and proudly flaunting the symbol they intended as a punishment.

COUNTRYWOMAN 2: It would be well deserved if we tore her rich gown off.

COUNTRYWOMAN 1: As for the red letter, I'll give her a scrap of my own crimson flannel to make a better one.

COUNTRYWOMAN 3: Oh, quiet, ladies, quiet. Don't let her hear you. Every stitch in that letter took a toll on her heart.

COUNTRYWOMAN 2: Toll on her heart?! If she had a heart.

(As the Townspeople continue to cast their judgment, Hester looks down at them in shame. She suddenly spots Roger Chillingworth, an older slightly deformed man dressed in a strange combination of traditional European clothing and Native-American garb. He gestures to Hester that she should not reveal his identity. Townsman is standing near Chillingworth.)

CHILLINGWORTH: *(To Townsman.)* My dear sir, may I ask who's this woman and why is she being held up for public shame?

TOWNSMAN: You must be a stranger, my friend, or you certainly would have heard about the evil deeds of Mistress Hester Prynne.

(Countrywomen overhear the conversation.)

COUNTRYWOMAN 1: *(To Chillingworth.)* Why, she's caused a great scandal in Master Dimmesdale's church.

CHILLINGWORTH: You see...I am a stranger. *(Pause.)* So could I ask you to tell me of this woman's crimes and why she's standing on this platform?

TOWNSMAN: Certainly. (*Indicating Hester.*) That woman, sir, was the wife of a learned man.

COUNTRYWOMAN 2: (*To Chillingworth.*) That he was English by birth but had lived for a long time in Amsterdam.

TOWNSMAN: (*To Chillingworth.*) Some years ago, he decided to cross the ocean and join us in Massachusetts. He sent his wife ahead of him and stayed behind to tend to some business.

COUNTRYWOMAN 1: (*To Chillingworth.*) Well, sir, in the two short years—

COUNTRYWOMAN 3: (*To Chillingworth.*) Or maybe less, the woman lived here in Boston...alone.

TOWNSMAN: (*To Chillingworth.*) Having heard nothing from her husband, his young woman, you see, was left to mislead herself.

CHILLINGWORTH: Mislead herself?! Beg your pardon, sir, unless she is the Second Coming of the Virgin Mary, I believe it takes two. (*Pause.*) So who, pray, is the father of the young child that Mistress Prynne is holding in her arms?

TOWNSMAN: To tell the truth, friend, that's still a puzzle. She absolutely refuses to speak. Perhaps the guilty man stands here in the crowd, observing this sad spectacle and forgetting that God sees him when no one else does.

CHILLINGWORTH: Her husband should come himself to look into the mystery.

TOWNSMAN: Yes, if he's still alive. (*Pause.*) Our Massachusetts magistrates realize that this woman is young and pretty and was surely tempted to her sin. What's more, her husband probably died at sea, so they've not punished her with death, as they very well might have. In their great mercy—

COUNTRYWOMAN 1: Great mercy?! Ha!

TOWNSMAN: Hush! Will you be quiet? (*Slight pause. To Chillingworth.*) As I was saying, they have sentenced her to stand for a mere three hours on the platform of the pillory

and then to wear a mark of shame on her bosom for the rest of her life.

CHILLINGWORTH: A wise sentence.

COUNTRYWOMAN 2: A wise sentence?! You have been in the wilderness too long, if you ask me.

CHILLINGWORTH: No one asked you.

COUNTRYWOMAN 2: *(Insulted.)* Well, I've never...

CHILLINGWORTH: *(To Townsman.)* She'll be like a living sermon against sin until the shameful letter is engraved onto her tombstone. Yet it bothers me that her partner in wickedness does not stand beside her on the platform. But he'll be known. *(Aside.)* He'll be known! I swear to God...he'll be known!

(Governor Bellingham, Reverend John Wilson, and Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale make their way to the balcony to sit in judgment of Hester. Wilson stands next to Dimmesdale.)

WILSON: *(Bellows down at Hester.)* Hear me, Hester Prynne! *(Hester looks up at the men.)* Hester Prynne, I've been arguing with my young brother here, whose preaching of the Gospel you've been privileged to hear. *(Lays his hand on Dimmesdale's shoulder.)* I've tried to persuade this godly young man to confront you with the wickedness of your sin here in front of God, these rulers, and all the people. Knowing you better than I do, he could better judge what arguments to use against your stubborn refusal to reveal the man who tempted you into this state. *(Pause.)* But this young man refuses. He says that it would be a wrong against your feminine nature to force you to reveal the secrets of your heart. I've tried to convince him that the shame lays in your sin, not in your confession. *(Pause.)* So what do you say, Brother Dimmesdale? Will it be you or me who deals with this poor sinner's soul?

BELLINGHAM: Good Master Dimmesdale, you're responsible for this woman's soul. You ought, therefore, to

encourage her to repent and to confess as proof of her repentance.

WILSON: (*To Dimmesdale.*) Speak to the woman, my brother. It's essential to her soul and—therefore, as the honorable Governor says—essential to yours as well since you are responsible for hers. Tell her to confess the truth!

(*Dimmesdale bends his head in silent prayer.*)

DIMMESDALE: (*Leaning over the balcony.*) Hester Prynne, you hear what this good man says and see the authority that compels me to speak. If you feel that speaking will comfort your soul and make your present punishment effective for your eternal salvation, then I charge you to speak out the name of your fellow sinner and fellow sufferer. (*Pause.*) Don't be silent out of tenderness or pity for him. Believe me, Hester, even if he stepped down from a place of power to stand beside you on that platform, it would be better for him to do so than to hide a guilty heart for the rest of his life. What can your silence do for him except tempt him, almost force him to add hypocrisy to his sins? Deny him the bitter but nourishing cup from which you now drink.

HESTER: (*Shaking her head.*) No. I'll not reveal his name.

(*Crowd gasps.*)

[END OF FREEVIEW]