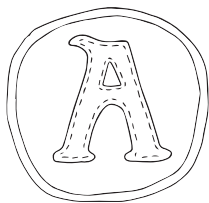


WORLDVIEW GUIDE

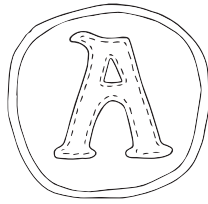
THE SCARLET LETTER



Douglas Wilson

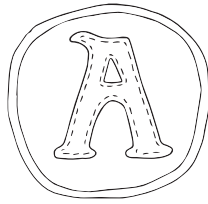
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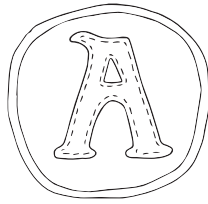
CONTENTS

Introduction	I
The World Around	3
About the Author	5
What Other Notables Said	7
Setting, Characters, and Plot Summary	9
Worldview Analysis	11
Quotables	21
21 Significant Questions and Answers	23
Further Discussion and Review	33
Taking the Classics Quiz	35



INTRODUCTION

Everyone thinks they know what the Puritans were like, and a big part of the reason *why* they think they know this can be found in this book, *The Scarlet Letter*. Since Nathaniel Hawthorne was a New Englander who wrote back in the “old days,” we sometimes assume that he learned about Puritanism by looking out his window. But the book is set in 1642, and was published in 1850—over two centuries later. While Hawthorne was descended from Puritans—his great, great grandfather was the only judge in the Salem witch trials who did not repent of what he had done—that world was long gone by Hawthorne’s day. Perhaps his ancestry is where Hawthorne acquired his somewhat morbid turn of mind.



WORLDVIEW ANALYSIS

Nathaniel Hawthorne was what some people call a dark romantic, meaning that he had a great interest in secrets, gothic mysteries, guilt, buried scandals, and psychological torments. Other than that, everything was all sunshine.

Hester lives in a cottage on the border between the town and the wilderness. The town is a rule-bound place, and the wilderness symbolizes freedom and happiness. We can see a broad shift in our cultural imagination here. In the biblical world, the wilderness was the haunt of jackals, and represented a true spiritual threat. The cultivated areas, by contrast, were tamed and safe. James Fenimore Cooper was an earlier contemporary of Hawthorne's, and like Hawthorne, he also had begun "romanticizing" the wilderness. The same tendency was being cultivated by the painters of the Hudson River School. In the old view, the wilderness was the problem, and the garden the solution. In the view that was coming into vogue, probably helped

by the contributions of Rousseau, the wilderness was authentic purity, and civilization was the problem.

The scarlet letter was assigned by the townspeople to Hester initially as the badge of her shame. Pearl, her daughter, is a living example of the same thing. Hester leans into the situation, however, and the meaning of the scarlet letter is transformed over the course of the novel. Beginning with the meaning *Adultery*, it ends as meaning *Able*.

This book reveals, as few others do, the power of fiction to recast virtually everything in a different light. The townspeople are represented as straitlaced and uptight because they disapprove of telling lies, and our sympathies are entirely with Hester, who refused to tell the truth, and secondarily with Arthur, who in a cowardly way lets Hester take the brunt of the punishment for the sin they both committed.

One of the more striking features of *The Scarlet Letter* is how it addresses the major themes of sin, hypocrisy, guilt, and atonement, and how it does so in a staunchly Puritan settlement, but without any reference to what actual Puritans would have said or done with such a situation. In other words, the Puritan minister Arthur Dimmesdale, the unrevealed lover of Hester Prynne, resorts to a form of penance, trying to atone for his sin all by himself, sharing a mark of shame with Hester (although secretly). Whatever else he does, Dimmesdale does not resort to the gospel of free grace for great sinners—which was the central