

Synopsis

*“ . . . in the view of Infinite Purity, we are sinners all alike . . .
the holiest among us has but attained so far above his fellows
as to discern more clearly the Mercy which looks down,
and repudiate the phantom of human merit
which would look aspiringly upward.”*

The Scarlet Letter is set in the Massachusetts Bay Colony sometime between 1640 and 1650. Hester Prynne has traveled alone to America to prepare a home for herself and her husband. In her husband's long absence Hester commits adultery and gives birth to a child. In accordance with the town's strict biblical law, Hester is punished, though leniently for that time in the colony. She is sentenced to stand for several hours on the town's scaffold exposed to public shame and to wear a scarlet "A" for the rest of her life. Hester's partner in sin, a prominent member of the community, remains silent about his own guilt, and Hester refuses to reveal his identity.

Meanwhile, Hester's long-absent husband, Roger Chillingworth, returns on the very day Hester must endure her public humiliation. He decides to remain silent concerning his own identity but determines to seek revenge on Hester's lover. He discovers the guilt-ridden man's identity, and by posing as a physician draws close to his victim and undermines the man's health and will to live. *The Scarlet Letter* examines the web of interaction between these characters and the themes of guilt, perception, and redemption.