

Study Guide Questions
The Scarlet Letter
Chapters 14-19

1. On page 154, H. says, "...Chillingworth was a striking evidence of man's faculty of transforming himself into a devil, if he will only for a reasonable space of time, undertake a devil's office." What does he mean?
2. On p. 155, Chillingworth seems to see something for the first time. What is it?
3. C. blames Dimmesdale for making him into a "fiend." Hester argues that he should avenge himself on her, not Dimmesdale. Why does C. not do so?
4. As revealed on p. 157, Hester knows that telling Dimmesdale who C. is can have dire consequences—even death for the young minister. Why is she willing to reveal C's identity and purpose to C?
5. On p. 157, how does C. show his fatalism?
6. As Chapter 15 begins, H. develops a strong line of imagery around Chillingworth. What is he associated with and what is the effect? Quote at least 4 examples of this kind of imagery.
7. On p. 160, Hester realizes that she believes herself more betrayed by C. than vice-versa: "And it seemed a fowler offence committed by Roger Chillingworth, than any which had since been done him, that, in the time when her heart knew no better, he had persuaded her to fancy herself happy by his side." After this revelation, Hawthorne offers men some advice on seeking a wife. What does he advise?
8. On the same page, H. observes, "But Hester ought long ago to have done with this injustice (C's marrying her too young). What did it betoken? Had seven long years, under the torture of the scarlet letter, inflicted so much of misery, and wrought out no repentance?" What Hawthornian characteristic does this question betoken?
9. While Hester apprises Chillingworth that she intends to reveal him to Dimmesdale, Pearl amuses herself by playing with the seaweed, foam, crabs, and other natural products of the sea. She displays a heartlessness as she pelts little birds that argues against her

symbolic association with goodness. How can the reader reconcile her actions with her symbolism?

10. On p. 164, Pearl, in a rare moment of earnestness, asks her mother what the scarlet letter means. Hester contemplates the possibility that Pearl is actually trying to establish a “meeting point of sympathy.” And though Hester thinks that in the past Pearl’s nature has been like an April breeze that “chills oftener than it caresses you,” she dares to hope that perhaps out of Pearl there might be emerging from “the little chaos of Pearl’s character, the steadfast principles of an unflinching courage,--an uncontrollable will,--a sturdy pride, which might be disciplined into self-respect,--and a bitter scorn of many things, which, when examined, might be found to have the taint of falsehood in them.” What does Hester do with this opportunity?

11. Two symbols are further developed on pp. 167-8. One involves the forest and the other Pearl. What values or meanings does Hawthorne invest each with?

12. On p. 170, how does H. match up the brook with Pearl?

13. On p. 171, Pearl says, “And, mother, he has his hand over his heart! Is it because, when the minister wrote his name in the book, the Black Man set his mark in that place? But why does he not wear it outside his bosom, as thou dost, mother?” Who is the “Black Man”? What does Pearl seem to understand?

14. At the bottom of p. 175, why does Dimmesdale say he’s had enough of penance, but has had none of penitence?

15. On p. 176, Hester realizes the “deep injury for which she was responsible to this unhappy man (Dimmesdale), in permitting him to lie for so many years...at the mercy of [Chillingworth.] Then Hawthorne tells us that “there had been a period when Hester was less alive to this consideration; or, *perhaps, in the misanthropy of her own trouble*, she left the minister to bear what she might picture to herself as a more tolerable doom.” What is Hawthorne saying about Hester’s motives for not telling Dimmesdale about C?

16. On p. 176, Hester spells out the “mechanics” of Chillingworth’s “malevolent” effect on Dimmesdale. Describe how C. works his black magic.

17. When Hester finally reveals the identity of D’s enemy, D. responds with violent passion. What does Hawthorne say that this capacity for passion has provided the devil?

18. Dimmesdale freely forgives Hester for hiding C's identity, saying that the old man's sin is blacker than theirs. Hester replies, "What we did had a consecration of its own. We felt it so! We said so to each other! Hast thou forgotten it? What is Hester's meaning? What does it reveal about her attitude toward her sin?"
19. In one of Hawthorne's uncharacteristically candid moments, he tells us what he thinks of Dimmesdale on p. 179. What does he say? Immediately after this comment, Hawthorne tells us that Dimmesdale worries about what C. will do now that he knows they know his evil purposes. What specifically do you think he is worried about?
20. On pp. 180, Hester suggests two avenues of escape to Dimmesdale. What are they and how does Dimmesdale counter each one? When he has turned both suggestions away, Hester, in a final attempt to buoy up his spirits, admonishes him to what?
21. In Chapter 18, Hawthorne once again takes us down a path of logical reasoning only to bring us up short with his Puritan background. He says that Hester has spent so long as an outcast that she has developed an independence of thought and a boldness—in fact, that the "scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread." What is his Puritan disclaimer?
22. On p. 184, Hawthorne offers five "excuses" for Dimmesdale as he totters on the brink of another sin (running away with Hester). What are they?
23. How does Hawthorne use symbolism and light and dark imagery to portray the transformation that happens when Hester discards the scarlet letter?
24. In the last of Chapter 18 and in Chapter 19, Hawthorne develops his lines of plant and weed imagery, light and dark imagery, and forest and brook symbolism. He also forces us to consider Pearl herself as a symbol. Describe how these images and symbols work.