

In-Class Exercise: The Scarlet Letter (Chapters 1-7)

Your task is to perform a close reading of language by first isolating or highlighting salient phrases, images, repeated words, or passages. Then, form interpretive conclusions based on these selections. Work with the assumption that language is not a neutral medium but a nexus of social, gender, cultural, and political implication. What hierarchies, power structures, gender and sexual tensions, unconscious feelings, desires, aggressions, and anxieties are borne out of these passages? Your goal is to offer these signs up for study—to do this, you may want to use the theoretical tenets espoused in psychoanalytical, feminist, or deconstructionist criticism to draw your conclusions. Also be conscious of the context from which the phrases, images, words, or passages come. Here are some examples: the phrase “wronging the very nature of the woman to force her to lay open” is highly provocative and suggests rape of power and invasion—bodily and psychologically—of the “public gaze.” Words like “spectacle,” “gaze,” and the repetition of “bosom” and “breast” certainly lend themselves to feminist and psychoanalytical interpretations—the crowd’s interest in Hester is a projection of sexual desire and is animated by unconscious desire, even fear of sexual “taboo.” She becomes the “object” of voyeuristic contemplation; repression, denial, and projection are key concepts.

Signs for Analysis:

Chapter II: “The Market Place”

“The young woman was tall, with a figure of perfect elegance on a large scale. . . Those who had before known her. . . were astonished, and even startled, to perceive how her beauty shone out. . .” (37)

The “young woman. . . stood fully revealed. . . it seemed to be her first impulse to clasp the infant closely to her bosom. . . as she might thereby conceal a certain token. . .” (36-37)

“the point which drew all eyes. . . was that SCARLET LETTER. . . upon her bosom” (37)

Female gossips” “It were well if we stripped Madam Hester’s rich gown off her dainty shoulders” (38)

“the ignominious letter on her breast” (38)

Hester “was thus displayed to the surrounding multitude” (39)

“with an infant at her bosom, an object to remind” (39)

“the spectacle of guilt and shame” (39)

“the solemn presence of men” “looking down upon the platform” “repressed and overpowered” the spectators’ ridicule (39-40)

“The unhappy culprit sustained herself as best a woman might, under the heavy weight of a thousand unrelenting eyes, all fastened upon her, and concentrated on her bosom” (40)

“She clutched the child so fiercely to her breast. . . “ “being the object of severe and universal observation” (41)

“she pressed the infant to her bosom” (42)

“. . . to wear a mark of shame upon her bosom” “with the scarlet token of infamy on her breast” (43-44)

“she was led back to prison, and vanished from the public gaze” (48)

Chapter III: The Recognition

“A writing horror twisted itself across his features, like a snake gliding swiftly over them” (42)

“Mistress Prynne to stand only a space of three hours on the platform of the pillory, and then and thereafter, for the remainder of her natural life, to wear a mask of shame upon her bosom” (43)

“the hot, midday sun burning down upon her face, and lighting up the shame; with the scarlet token of infamy on her breast” (44)

John Wilson “looked like the darkly engraved portraits which we see prefixed to the old volumes of sermons; and had no more right than one of those portraits would have, to step forth, as he now did, and meddle with a question of human guilt, passion, and anguish” (45)

“it were wronging the very nature of a woman to force her to lay open her heart’s secrets in such a broad daylight, and in presence of so great a multitude” (45)

“Good Master Dimmesdale, the responsibility of this woman’s soul lies greatly with you” (46)

“a being who felt himself quite astray and at a loss in the pathway of human existence” (46)

“wondrous strength and generosity of a woman’s heart! She will not speak” (48)

Chapter IV: The Interview

“Recognize me not, by word, by sign, by look” (53)

“Art thou the Black Man that haunts the forest round about us?” (53)

Chapter V: Hester at Her Needle

“Throughout them all, giving up her individuality, she would become the general symbol at which the preacher and moralist might point, and in which they might vivify and embody their images of woman’s frailty and sinful passion” (54)

“a small thatched cottage. . . abandoned, because the soil about it was too sterile for cultivation” (55)

“the airy charm that early began to develop itself in the little girl, but which appeared to have also a deeper meaning” (57)

“She [Hester] stood apart from mortal interests, yet close beside them” (58)

“Hester Prynne had always the dreadful agony in feeling a human eye upon the token” (59)

“Sometimes, the red infamy upon her breast would give a sympathetic throb” (60)

Chapter VI: Pearl

“the child had a native grave which does not invariably coexist with faultless beauty” (61)

“Hester could not help questioning, at such moments, whether Pearl was a human child. She seemed rather an airy sprite” (63)

“the spell of life went forth from her ever creative spirit” (65)

“she [Hester] fancied that she beheld, not her own miniature portrait, but another face in the small black mirror of Pearl’s eye” (66)

Chapter VII: The Governor’s Hall

“Her mother had allowed the gorgeous tendencies of her imagination their full play; arraying her in a crimson velvet tunic, of a peculiar cut, abundantly embroidered with fantasies and flourishes of gold thread” (69)

“It was the scarlet letter in another form; the scarlet letter endowed with life” (70)

“the scarlet letter was represented in exaggerated and gigantic proportions” (72)

“the proprietor appeared already to have relinquished. . . the native English taste for ornamental gardening” (73)

“Pearl, seeing the rose-bushes, began to cry for a red rose, and would not be pacified” (73)