

SUMMARY

The Scarlet Letter is a novel set in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 1640s. The story follows Hester Prynne, who is forced to wear a scarlet letter 'A' on her chest for the crime of adultery. She is treated as an outcast by the colony. Hester's husband, posing as a doctor named Roger Chillingworth, comes to see her in jail and makes her promise not to reveal his identity. He swears to find out who the father of the baby is. Hester comes out of jail with her baby in her arms and has to wear the scarlet letter 'A'.

Hester makes her living doing needlework and making clothes for the poor. She hears that some people in the colony want her daughter Pearl taken away and given to foster parents who will raise her better than Hester. The young reverend Dimmesdale, who is clearly sick, puts his hand over his heart like he's in pain. The townspeople push Hester and Dimmesdale together as doctor and patient and eventually persuade them to live together in the same house. Chillingworth builds a new identity for himself as a doctor and becomes a demonic influence on Dimmesdale. Dimmesdale is tormented by guilt at the fact that he slept with Hester and no one knows it.

Hester is disgusted that she was ever married to Chillingworth and urges Dimmesdale to leave the colony and start a fresh life somewhere else. She says she'll come with him and be his wife.

Dimmesdale has agreed to run away with Hester and Pearl on a ship in a few days. Hester has made arrangements with the ship's captain for them to leave, but the captain informs her that Roger Chillingworth is coming with them. Chillingworth dies and leaves a huge inheritance to Pearl, who apparently marries someone wealthy in Europe. Hester eventually comes back to live in her cottage and wear her scarlet letter again. She is buried beside Dimmesdale, but not too close beside him, and they share a headstone with an "A" on it.