

Study Guide: Chapters 21-24

As we approach the end of this novel, consider the contrasts Hawthorne presents – in particular, whether human beings freely choose their fate or become victims of what Chillingworth described as that “dark necessity.” It seems we readers are swung from one world view to another, where these philosophical attitudes are best embodied in the characters of Hester and Dimmesdale. She operates from strength, chooses her behavior while she wears the scarlet letter, roams like an Indian through uncharted intellectual and religious territory, and finally (literally) raises Arthur from the forest floor with her daring plans to escape the consequences of their sin. Other than his flirtation with Chillingworth’s unorthodox studies, Dimmesdale has remained within the strictures of his faith, where he agonizes over whether God’s mercy will cover his sins, thus making him one of the Elect. But at this point he relies on Hester’s strength to escape Calvinism’s iron-clad theology.

Chapter 21: The New England Holiday

1. Note the difference in Hester’s attitude toward Salem.
2. Pearl’s questions about the reasons for the town’s holiday give Hawthorne the opportunity to reflect on the character of the early emigrants with respect to those of their immediate descendants. How does Hawthorne sum up the effects of these second-generation Puritans on their descendants?
3. In addition to the native-Americans we have another colorful group of people. What new information does one of these give to Hester?
4. Finally, recall the stage directions for Hester and Chillingworth in chapter two and note how they are similarly situated at the end of this chapter.

Chapter 22: The Procession

1. What is the difference in Arthur Dimmesdale as he processes in the town?
2. How does Hester feel about this change in his demeanor? Pearl’s reaction?
3. Mistress Hibbins makes a prediction to Hester. What is it?
4. Adding the swarthy and colorful mariners to the market place, Hawthorne again manages a scene similar to the one in chapter two. What comparison ends the chapter?

Chapter 23: The Revelation of the Scarlet Letter

1. Combining religion with politics, typical of a theocracy, Dimmesdale preaches a glorious future for the people of New England. Check out the concept of “manifest destiny” current in the campaign of 1844.
2. What is the crowd response to Dimmesdale’s sermon? How does he appear now?
3. What is the response of Reverend Wilson and Governor Bellingham to Dimmesdale’s physical state?
4. At the foot of the scaffold Dimmesdale calls Hester and Pearl to come to him. What does Pearl do? How does Hester react? Note her struggle.
5. Chillingworth rushes forth and offers a last temptation. What is it? In refusing that temptation, what sin does Dimmesdale avoid?
6. Dimmesdale acknowledges Hester’s strength, but what implores her strength to be guided by...?
7. Hester helps Dimmesdale mount the scaffold steps. Chillingworth follows. What does he tell Dimmesdale? Meaning?
8. Dimmesdale confesses, in accordance with his religion. What does Chillingworth say? Dimmesdale’s response? Pearl’s action?
9. What is Hester’s question? Dimmesdale’s response? Explain his idea of God’s mercy.

Chapter 24: Conclusion

1. What are the various reactions of the crowd?
2. What is Hawthorne’s tone when he describes the reaction of certain “highly respectable witnesses”?

3. What does the narrator say is the major moral of the minister's miserable story?
4. What happens to Chillingworth?
5. What do you think of Hawthorne's comments on the relationship of love and hatred to each other? Can hatred be transmuted into love? Is such an alchemy available?
6. What seems to have happened to Pearl?
7. Why does Hester return and take up the scarlet letter?
8. Touching on Hester's trail-blazing ruminations, Hawthorne says another kind of prophetess is needed "in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness." What do you think?
9. Your response to the space between the two graves, "as if the two sleepers had no right to mingle."
10. Does Hester choose to accept her fate at the novel's end? Or was she always fated to make that choice? Did a "dark necessity" propel both Hester and Arthur to "violate their reverence each for the other's soul" or did each make a conscious choice?
11. Finally, is the novel's ending ambiguous or not?