

Excerpt II from *The Scarlet Letter*

In this scene, Hester has been forced to stand on a platform in the town's marketplace to suffer public humiliation. Suddenly, her husband, who has been missing for a long period of time, makes his first appearance in the town.

From this intense consciousness of being the object of severe and universal observation, the wearer of the scarlet letter was at length relieved, by **discerning**, on the outskirts of the crowd, a figure which irresistibly took possession of her thoughts. An Indian, in his native garb, was standing there; but the red men were not so infrequent visitors of the English settlements, that one of them would have attracted any notice from Hester Prynne, at such a time; much less would he have excluded all other objects and ideas from her mind. By the Indian's side, and evidently sustaining a companionship with him, stood a white man, clad in a strange disarray of civilized and savage costume.

He was small in stature, with a furrowed **visage**, which, as yet, could hardly be termed aged. There was a remarkable intelligence in his features, as of a person who had so cultivated his mental part that it could not fail to mold the physical to itself, and become **manifest** by unmistakable tokens. Although, by a seemingly careless arrangement of his **heterogeneous** garb, he had **endeavored** to conceal or **abate** the peculiarity, it was sufficiently evident to Hester Prynne, that one of this man's shoulders rose higher than the other. Again, at the first instant of perceiving that thin **visage**, and the slight deformity of the figure, she pressed her infant to her bosom with so convulsive a force that the poor babe uttered another cry of pain. But the mother did not seem to hear it.

At his arrival in the market-place, and some time before she saw him, the stranger had bent his eyes on Hester Prynne. It was carelessly, at first, like a man chiefly accustomed to look inward, and to whom external matters are of little value and import, unless they bear relation to something within his mind. Very soon, however, his look became keen and penetrative. A **writhing** horror twisted itself across his features, like a snake gliding swiftly over them, and making one little pause, with all its wreathed **intervolutions**, in open sight. His face darkened with some powerful emotion, which, nevertheless, he so instantaneously controlled by an effort of his will, that, save at a single moment, its expression might have passed for calmness. After a brief space, the convulsion grew almost imperceptible, and finally subsided into the depths of his nature. When he found the eyes of Hester Prynne fastened on his own, and saw that she appeared to recognize him, he slowly and calmly raised his finger, made a gesture with it in the air, and laid it on his lips.

Then, touching the shoulder of a townsman who stood next to him, he addressed him, in a formal and courteous manner.

"I pray you, good sir," said he, "who is this woman?—and wherefore is she here set up to public shame?"

"You must needs be a stranger in this region, friend," answered the townsman, looking curiously at the questioner and his savage companion, "else you would surely have heard of Mistress Hester Prynne, and her evil doings. She hath raised a great scandal, I promise you, in godly Master Dimmesdale's church."

"You say truly," replied the other. "I am a stranger, and have been a wanderer, sorely against my will. I have met with grievous mishaps by sea and land, and have been long held in bonds among the **heathen** folk, to the southward; and am now brought hither by this Indian, to be redeemed out of my captivity. Will it please you, therefore, to tell me of Hester Prynne's—have I her name rightly?—of this woman's offenses, and what has brought her to yonder scaffold?"

"Truly, friend; and methinks it must gladden your heart, after your troubles and **sojourn** in the wilderness," said the townsman, "to find yourself, at length, in a land where **iniquity** is searched out, and punished in the sight of rulers and people; as here in our godly New England. Yonder woman, sir, you must know, was the wife of a certain learned man, English by birth, but who had long dwelt in Amsterdam, whence, some good time ago, he was minded to cross over and cast in his lot with us of the Massachusetts. To this purpose, he sent his wife before him, remaining himself to look after some necessary affairs. Marry, good sir, in some two years, or less, that the woman has been a dweller here in Boston, no tidings have come of this learned gentleman, Master Prynne; and his young wife, look you, being left to her own misguidance—"

"Ah! aha!—I conceive you," said the stranger, with a bitter smile. "So learned a man as you speak of should have learned this, too, in his books. And who, by your favor, sir, may be the father of yonder babe—it is some three or four months old, I should judge—which Mistress Prynne is holding in her arms?"

"Of a truth, friend, that matter remaineth a riddle; and the Daniel¹ who shall **expound** it is yet awaiting," answered the townsman. "Madam Hester absolutely refuseth to speak, and the magistrates have laid their heads together in vain. Peradventure the guilty one stands looking on at this sad spectacle, unknown of man, and forgetting that God sees him."

¹ A Biblical prophet.

“The learned man,” observed the stranger, with another smile, “should come himself, to look into the mystery.”

110 “It behooves him well, if he be still in life,” responded the townsman. “Now, good sir, our Massachusetts magistracy, bethinking themselves that this woman is youthful and fair, and doubtless was strongly tempted to her fall—and that, moreover, is most likely, her husband may be at the bottom of the sea—they have not been bold to put in force the extremity of our righteous law against her. The penalty thereof is death. But in their great mercy and tenderness of heart, they have doomed Mistress Prynne to stand only a space of three hours on the platform of the pillory², and then and thereafter, for the remainder of her natural life, to wear a mark of shame upon her bosom.”

120 “A wise sentence!” remarked the stranger, gravely bowing his head. “Thus she will be a living sermon against sin, until the **ignominious** letter be engraved upon her tombstone. It irks me, nevertheless, that the partner of her iniquity should not, at least, stand on the scaffold by her side. But he will be known!—he will be known!—he will be known!”

Comprehension Questions

Based on the context in which they appear, what do the following words mean?

costume (line 14)
hardly (line 16)
cultivated (line 18)
tokens (line 20)
wherefore (line 57)
redeemed (line 71)
minded (line 85)
conceive (line 93)
wanting (line 101)
peradventure (line 103)
fair (line 113)
fall (line 114)
bold (line 116)
thereof (line 118)

Based on the context in which they appear, what do the following pronouns refer to?

itself (line 19)
they (line 36)
them (line 40)

What is Hester “relieved” (line 3) from at the beginning of the passage, and in what way is she relieved? How would you characterize the use of this term?

What literary device is used on lines 5-6, and what is its effect?

² A device used for public humiliation in which the hands and feet are locked.

What is the “peculiarity” mentioned on line 23?

What is the symbolic significance of Mr. Prynne’s furrowed visage and physical deformity?

What is the implication of the narrator’s use of the word *bent* in line 32? What is the implication of the use of the word *fastened* in line 49? (Consider the tone of these words and the mental associations we make with them.)

Why does Mr. Prynne’s look become “keen and penetrative” (lines 37-38)? Why does the narrator use the expression “some powerful emotion” to describe his reaction (line 42)? Why does he lay his finger on his lips (lines 51-52)? Why does he say “have I her name rightly” (line 73)?

What are the narrative functions of Mr. Prynne’s conversation with the townsman?

What is the meaning of the expression “cast in his lot” (line 85)?

How does the townsman intend to finish the sentence that Mr. Prynne interrupts (line 92)? Why do you think he interrupts?

What is the irony of Mr. Prynne’s comments about the “learned man”? What does he imply the man should have learned from his books?

What is the townsman’s view of the man who committed adultery with Hester (lines 104-106)?

What explanation(s) does the townsman give for the lightness of Hester’s punishment (lines 111-123)?

In what way is Hester a “living sermon” (lines 125-126)?

What rhetorical device(s) is the use of the word “irks” (line 127) an example of?

What rhetorical device and narrative technique are used in the last sentence (lines 129-130), and what is their effect? What does this comment suggest about Mr. Prynne?

Questions for Discussion and Writing

Discuss the characterization of Mr. Prynne in this passage. What impression of him does the narrator give us, and how does he accomplish this?

What Biblical allusions are made in this passage? What effect do they have?

How is it important to the plot that Chillingworth arrives precisely at this point in the story?