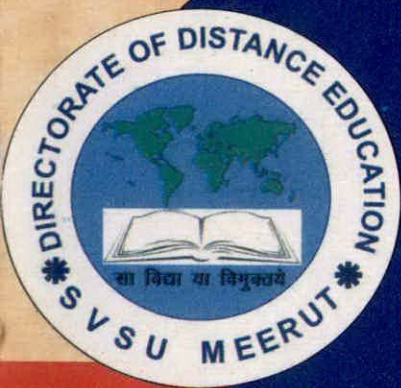
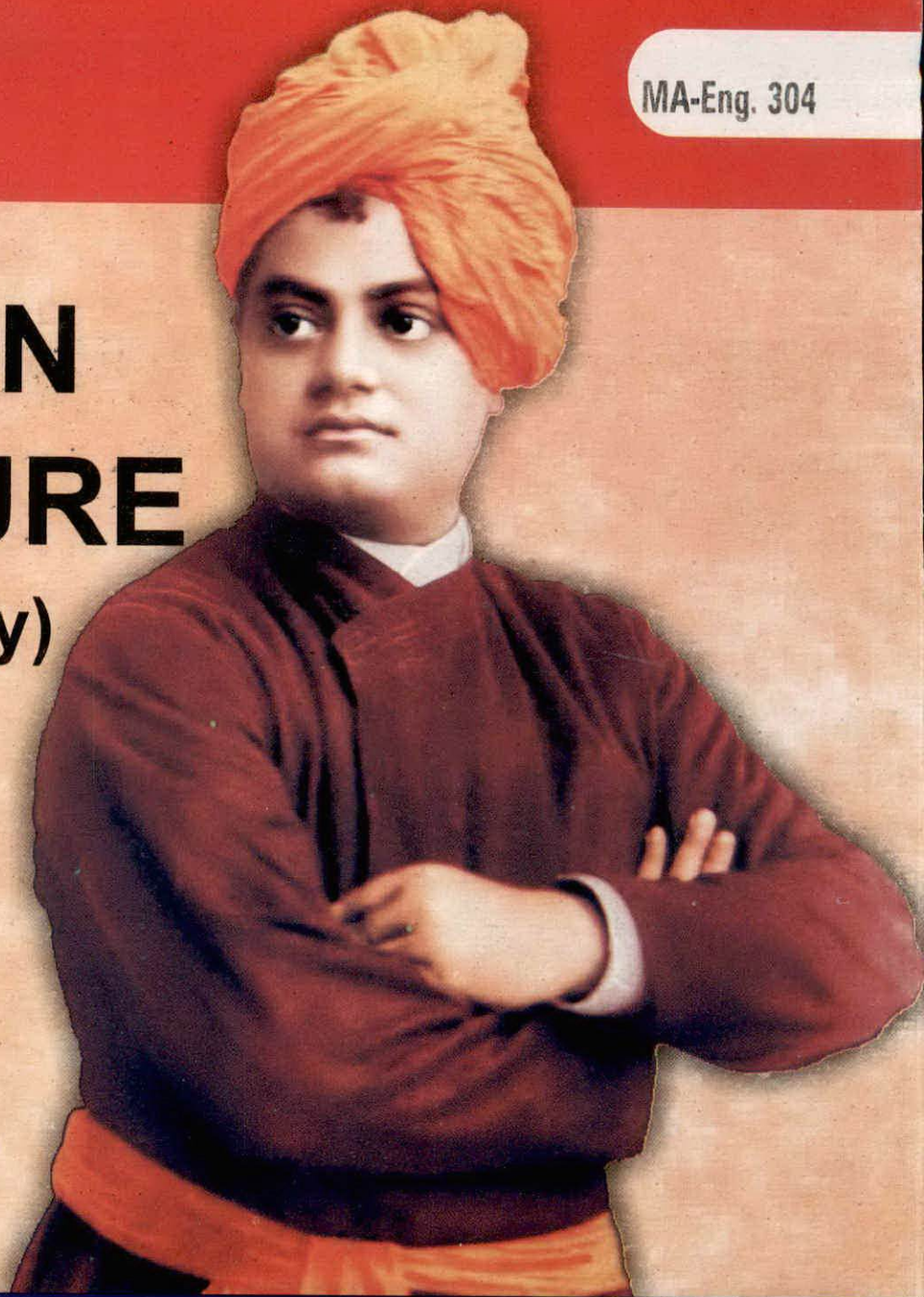


MA-Eng. 304

# AMERICAN LITERATURE

(19th Century)



**DIRECTORATE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION**

**SWAMI VIVEKANAND  
SUBHARTI UNIVERSITY**  
Meerut (National Capital Region Delhi)

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## **PREFACE**

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*In this course, we shall deal with various aspects of American Literature (19th Century)*

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- BACKGROUND TOPIC : PURITANISM
- BACKGROUND TOPIC : TRANSCENDENTALISM
- BACKGROUND TOPIC : THE FRONTIER
- THE SCARLET LETTER (Nathaniel Hawthorne)
- THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN (Mark Twain)
- WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF ? (Edward Elbee)

## **SYLLABUS**

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**Semester-III**

**American Literature (19th Century)**

**(MA-Eng.-304)**

### **Unit-I : Background Topics :**

Puritanism

Transcendentalism

The Frontier

### **Unit-II : Nathaniel Hawthorne :**

The Scarlet Letter

### **Unit-III : Mark Twain :**

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

### **Unit-IV : Edward Albee:**

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?



# CONTENTS

|                                                             |        |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|--------|
| 1. BACKGROUND TOPIC : PURITANISM                            | 1-6    |
| 2. BACKGROUND TOPIC : TRANSCENDENTALISM                     | 7-10   |
| 3. BACKGROUND TOPIC : THE FRONTIER                          | 11-13  |
| 4. THE SCARLET LETTER ( <i>Nathaniel Hawthorne</i> )        | 14-56  |
| 5. THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN ( <i>Mark Twain</i> ) | 57-93  |
| 6. WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF ? ( <i>Edward Elbee</i> ) | 94-116 |

**BACKGROUND TOPIC : PURITANISM****Puritanism**

Puritanism was a religious reformation movement that began in England in the late 1500s. Its initial goal was removing any remaining links to Catholicism within the Church of England after its separation from the Catholic Church. To do this, Puritans sought to change the structure and ceremonies of the church. They also wanted broader lifestyle changes in England to align with their strong moral beliefs. Some Puritans emigrated to the New World and established colonies built around churches that fit those beliefs. Puritanism had a broad impact on England's religious laws and the founding and development of the colonies in America.

**Beliefs**

Some Puritans believed in total separation from the Anglican Church, while others simply sought reform and wished to remain a part of the church. The belief that the church should not have any rituals or ceremonies not found in the Bible united the two factions. They believed that the government should enforce morals and punish behavior such as drunkenness and swearing. However, Puritans did believe in religious freedom and generally respected the differences in belief systems of those outside the Church of England.

Some of the major disputes between the Puritans and the Anglican Church regarded the beliefs that priests should not wear vestments (clerical clothing), that ministers should actively spread the word of God, and that the church hierarchy (of bishops, archbishops, etc.) should be replaced with a committee of elders.

Regarding their relationships with God, Puritans believed that salvation was entirely up to God and that God had chosen only a select few to be saved, yet no one could know if they were among this group. They also believed that each person should have a personal covenant with God. The Puritans were influenced by Calvinism and adopted its beliefs in predestination and the sinful nature of man. Puritans believed that all people must live by the Bible and should have a deep familiarity with the text. To achieve this, Puritans placed a strong emphasis on literacy and education.



## **Puritans in England**

Puritanism first emerged in the 16th and 17th centuries in England as a movement to remove all vestiges of Catholicism from the Anglican Church. The Anglican Church first separated from Catholicism in 1534, but when Queen Mary took the throne in 1553, she reverted it to Catholicism. Under Mary, many Puritans faced exile. This threat and the increasing prevalence of Calvinism—which provided support for their viewpoint—further strengthened Puritan beliefs. In 1558, Queen Elizabeth took the throne and reestablished the separation from Catholicism, but not thoroughly enough for the Puritans. The group rebelled and, as a result, were prosecuted for refusing to abide by laws that required specific religious practices. This factor contributed to the eruption of the English civil war between the Parliamentarians and the Royalists, who fought in part over religious freedom in 1642.

## **Puritans in America**

In 1608, some Puritans moved from England to Holland. In 1620, they boarded the Mayflower to Massachusetts, where they established Plymouth Colony. In 1628, another group of Puritans founded the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Puritans eventually spread throughout New England, establishing new self-governing churches. To become a full member of the church, seekers had to testify of their personal relationship with God. Only those who could demonstrate a “godly” lifestyle were permitted to join.

The witch trials of the late 1600s in places like Salem were run by the Puritans’ religious and moral beliefs. But as the 17th century wore on, the cultural strength of the Puritans gradually waned. As the first generation of immigrants died out, their children and grandchildren became less connected with the church. By 1689, the majority of New Englanders thought of themselves as Protestants rather than Puritans, though many of them were just as sharply opposed to Catholicism.

As the religious movement in America eventually fractured into many groups (such as Quakers, Baptists, Methodists, and more), Puritanism became more of an underlying philosophy than a religion. It evolved into a way of life focused on self-reliance, moral sturdiness, tenacity, political isolationism, and austere living. These beliefs gradually evolved into a secular lifestyle that was (and sometimes is) thought of as a distinctly New England mentality.

## **QUESTIONS**

### **■ Multiple Choice Questions**

1. To the Puritan clergy, Anne Hutchinson’s most dangerous belief was :  
(a) that men and women were equal in the eyes of God.  
(b) that Roger Williams was innocent.

- (c) that God had communicated directly to her.
- (d) that the Puritan clergy had taught false scripture.
2. Which of the following statements does not accurately describe the difficulty that Puritans had maintaining a harmonious way of life?
- (a) It was difficult to maintain a balance between emotion and intellect.
- (b) It was difficult to maintain a balance between the individual and community.
- (c) It was difficult to maintain a balance between spiritual equality and social hierarchy.
- (d) Men and women were held in strict equality with one another.
3. The Puritans believed that land should be :
- (a) shared with Native Americans. (b) communally farmed.
- (c) owned by the individual who developed his own privately owned parcels of land.
- (d) used to provide produce and profits with all the members of the town.
4. Which statement best describes the raising of children in Puritan households?
- (a) Children were sent off to boarding schools at an early age.
- (b) Children were pampered by their mothers and ignored by their fathers.
- (c) Since infant mortality was so high, surviving children were raised by overly protective mothers.
- (d) Children were expected to strictly obey their elders and were raised to fear damnation.
5. About 90 percent of those who migrated to the Chesapeake in the 17th century came as :
- (a) soldiers (b) explorers
- (c) farmers (d) servants
6. Which of the following statements was not a consequence of the success of tobacco farming in Virginia?
- (a) Land became easier to obtain in Virginia than in England.
- (b) Martial law was extended until 1630.
- (c) English common law replaced martial law.
- (d) Virginia became an attractive location for many living in England.
7. The Anglo-Powhatan Wars, which occurred between 1610 and 1646, were caused by :
- (a) the colonists who refused to trade with the Indians.

- (b) the Indians who refused to help the colonists.
  - (c) Powhatan's refusal to let John Rolfe marry Pocahontas.
  - (d) the British policy to subjugate the Indians to British authority.
8. The early colonists of Jamestown included which of the following?
- (a) Skilled tradesmen who helped the others survive the rigors of colonization.
  - (b) Farmers who helped raise food for the others.
  - (c) A large number of peasants.
  - (d) Nobles who were charged with looking for gold.
9. The Englishman John Smith is best described as :
- (a) an explorer
  - (b) a soldier of fortune
  - (c) an English nobleman
  - (d) a close friend of King James.
10. The first New England towns reflected all of the following except :
- (a) The colonists' first houses were very small and simple.
  - (b) The placement of houses was very standardized with streets and town centers.
  - (c) The colonists had to adapt their village settlement ideas to a new environment.
  - (d) Houses were placed closer to farmland than to neighbors.
11. Which of the following statements is a correct description of the Mayflower Compact?
- (a) The men on board the Mayflower bound themselves into a "civic body politic."
  - (b) The Pilgrims practiced an early and pure form of democracy.
  - (c) The Mayflower Compact applied just to the non-Pilgrims on board the Mayflower.
  - (d) None of the above.
12. The Pequot War was caused by :
- (a) English desire for more land.
  - (b) Conflicts among Europeans about who would govern the Connecticut River Valley.
  - (c) Conflicts among Native Americans about who would trade with the Europeans.
  - (d) All of the above.
13. Which of the following statements about the adoption of slavery in the Chesapeake Bay is not correct?
- (a) Africans arrived in Virginia in 1619.



- (b) Slaves had an indistinct status-they were neither indentured servants nor chattel slaves.
  - (c) Slaves faced the same problems as the English: short life spans, harsh environmental and working conditions, and little or no reward for their efforts.
  - (d) Slaves saw their lives in the Chesapeake Bay region as a distinct improvement over their lives in Africa.
14. Which of the following statements characterizes the Puritans and Pilgrims?
- (a) They emigrated to North America for both religious and economic reasons.
  - (b) They were predominantly middle class and they had self-funded their ventures so that they could control all aspects of their work and their profit.
  - (c) They believed they were on a mission to establish a new society based on God's word.
  - (d) They were fleeing justice in England.
15. Which was not a reason that English plantation owners in the Chesapeake Bay region adopted slavery so quickly?
- (a) The need for laborers and the price of slaves.
  - (b) The disease rate of indentured servants.
  - (c) The lack of indentured servants and scarcity of women.
  - (d) The British already had trade relations with Spain to secure slaves from Africa.

#### ■ Short Answers Type Questions

1. What are 5 values of *Puritanism*?
2. What did the Puritans believe?
3. What the Puritans did for fun?
4. What basic principles did the Puritans live by?
5. Why did the Puritans believe in the importance of educating everyone?
6. What are the main characteristics of *Puritanism*?
7. How did *Puritanism* start?

#### ■ Long Answers Type Questions

1. How did the Puritans treat literature during the 19th century?
2. How did Puritans worship and behave?
3. Why did Puritans in England reject fiction? Is it simply because it is seen as entertainment and, therefore, a distraction from dedication one's life and every single action to worship God, or is there any more detailed explanation?

4. Write a critical note on *Puritanism*.
5. How did the creation of America emerge in the literature of the period?

### **Answers**

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#### **☞ Multiple Choice Questions**

- |        |         |         |         |         |         |         |        |    |
|--------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|--------|----|
| 1. (c) | 2. (d)  | 3. (c)  | 4. (d)  | 5. (d)  | 6. (b)  | 7. (d)  | 8. (d) | 9. |
| (b)    | 10. (b) | 11. (a) | 12. (d) | 13. (d) | 14. (c) | 15. (d) |        |    |

## BACKGROUND TOPIC : TRANSCENDENTALISM

### Transcendentalism

Transcendentalism, 19th-century movement of writers and philosophers in New England who were loosely bound together by adherence to an idealistic system of thought based on a belief in the essential unity of all creation, the innate goodness of humanity, and the supremacy of insight over logic and experience for the revelation of the deepest truths. German transcendentalism (especially as it was refracted by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle), Platonism and Neoplatonism, the Indian and Chinese scriptures, and the writings of such mystics as Emanuel Swedenborg and Jakob Böhme were sources to which the New England Transcendentalists turned in their search for a liberating philosophy.

Eclectic and cosmopolitan in its sources and part of the Romantic movement, New England Transcendentalism originated in the area around Concord, Massachusetts, and from 1830 to 1855 represented a battle between the younger and older generations and the emergence of a new national culture based on native materials. It attracted such diverse and highly individualistic figures as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Orestes Brownson, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, and James Freeman Clarke, as well as George Ripley, Bronson Alcott, the younger W.E. Channing, and W.H. Channing. In 1840 Emerson and Margaret Fuller founded *The Dial* (1840-44), the prototypal "little magazine" wherein some of the best writings by minor Transcendentalists appeared. The writings of the Transcendentalists and those of contemporaries such as Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, for whom they prepared the ground, represent the first flowering of the American artistic genius and introduced the American Renaissance in literature.

In their religious quest, the Transcendentalists rejected the conventions of 18th-century thought, and what began in a dissatisfaction with Unitarianism developed into a repudiation of the whole established order. They were leaders in experimental schemes for living (Thoreau at Walden Pond, Alcott at Fruitlands, Ripley at Brook Farm); women's suffrage; better

conditions for workers; temperance for all; modifications of dress and diet; the rise of free religion; educational innovation; and other humanitarian causes.

Heavily indebted to the Transcendentalists' organic philosophy, aesthetics, and democratic aspirations were the pragmatism of William James and John Dewey, the environmental planning of Benton MacKaye and Lewis Mumford, the architecture (and writings) of Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright, and the American "modernism" in the arts promoted by Alfred Stieglitz.

## QUESTIONS

### ■ Multiple Choice Questions

1. *Transcendentalism* was a philosophy within what larger literary movement?  
(a) *Puritanism* (b) American Romanticism  
(c) The Enlightenment (d) American Realism
2. *Transcendentalism* prompted a shift in thought, emphasizing the following :  
(a) Reason and Logic (b) Reality/Science  
(c) Intuition and nature (d) Society over the individual
3. *Transcendentalism* was a movement during which time?  
(a) 1776-1780 (b) 1830-1860  
(c) 1900-1960 (d) 2001-2018
4. The transcendentalist believed that :  
(a) Humans are born a blank slate.  
(b) Humans are born with a sinful nature.  
(c) Humans are born basically good.  
(d) Humans are boring.
5. Which is a tenet of *Transcendentalism*?  
(a) Everyone is capable of understanding God through the use of intuition.  
(b) The individual is secondary to God and nature.  
(c) Inspiration comes from civilization and society.  
(d) God is a distant, uninvolved being.
6. Which is not a tenet of *Transcendentalism*?  
(a) The individual is paramount,  
(b) Major inspiration included nature and intuition.  
(c) The rational is valued over the spiritual.  
(d) God is present in every aspect of nature.



7. Many Transcendentalists were :  
(a) Politicians (b) Ministers and Priests  
(c) Scientists (d) Feminists and abolitionists
8. Which of the following was not a Transcendentalist?  
(a) Ralph Waldo Emerson (b) Henry David Thoreau  
(c) Bronson Alcott (d) Jonathon Edwards
9. Wrote "The American Scholar" and "Self-Reliance" :  
(a) Margaret Fuller (b) Ralph Waldo Emerson  
(c) Henry David Thoreau (d) Benjamin Franklin
10. Wrote "Civil Disobedience" :  
(a) Ralph Waldo Emerson (b) Henry David Thoreau  
(c) Bronson Alcott (d) Ghandi
11. Inspired Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ghandi :  
(a) Emerson (b) Alcott  
(c) Fuller (d) Thoreau
12. According to Transcendentalist views :  
(a) Materialism is bad  
(b) Materialism is necessary  
(c) Financial security is the goal to lead to self-sufficiency  
(d) Money is good!
13. Select all that are part of Transcendental pursuits :  
(a) intuition (b) connection with God and nature  
(c) self-reliance (d) All of the above
14. Transcendentalism is a reformed version of the Unitarian religion.  
(a) True (b) False
15. Walt Whitman was an American poet, inspired by Transcendental ideas.  
(a) True (b) False

### ■ Short Answers Type Questions

1. What does *Transcendentalism* mean?
2. What is *Transcendentalism*?
3. Are both Hawthorne and Poe against *Transcendentalism*?
4. What does *Transcendentalism* mean in literature?
5. What kind of community did the Transcendentalists live in?
6. What was the movement known as "*Transcendentalism*?"

### ■ Long Answers Type Questions

1. What are the differences between *Transcendentalism* and *Puritanism* (*Transcendentalism* vs. *Puritanism*)?



2. What are the pros and cons of *Transcendentalism*?
3. What are the basic elements of *Transcendentalism*?
4. What are the beliefs of the major leaders in the transcendentalist movement?
5. Examine the significance of the effects of the transcendentalist movement.
6. What beliefs of Emerson and Thoreau are considered transcendentalist?
7. What does *Transcendentalism* have to do with reincarnation?
8. What were the beliefs of *Transcendentalism*, and how did American writers incorporate them into their work?
9. Who is considered the most famous Transcendentalist from the Transcendentalist movement?
10. Explain how *Transcendentalism* emerged in the early nineteenth century.

## ANSWERS

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### ☛ Multiple Choice Questions

1. (b) 2. (c) 3. (b) 4. (c) 5. (a) 6. (c) 7. (d) 8. (d) 9. (b)  
10. (b) 11. (d) 12. (a) 13. (d) 14. (b) 15. (a)

## BACKGROUND TOPIC : THE FRONTIER

### The Frontier

The frontier myth or myth of the West is one of the influential myths in American culture. The frontier is the concept of a place that exists at the edge of a civilization, particularly during a period of expansion. The American frontier occurred throughout the 17th to 20th centuries as European Americans colonized and expanded across North America. This period of time became romanticized and idealized in literature and art to form a myth. Richard Slotkin, a prominent scholar on the subject, defines the myth of the frontier as "America as a wide-open land of unlimited opportunity for the strong, ambitious, self-reliant individual to thrust his way to the top."

### Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis

In the United States, the concept of the frontier first became significant in 1893 when Frederick Jackson Turner used the term as a model for understanding American culture in his essay, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. In his *Frontier Thesis*, Turner defined the concept of the frontier as "the meeting point between savagery and civilization," and argued that this point was the foundation for American identity and politics. Turner's interpretation of American expansion was that Americans had moved west in waves, and the frontier was the tip of those movements, always the furthest point from civilization. Turner claimed that at the frontier American pioneers were transformed by their interaction with Native Americans and the wilderness to become rugged individuals who prized their freedom and individualism. As the frontier continued to move west it continued to transform the pioneering Americans who went there, and in turn transform the nation. Turner argued that nationalism, democracy (because of increased individualism), and a rejection of European ideals were a result of the frontier. Thus Turner concluded that America was only unique because of its interaction with the frontier and the West as it developed during expansion, "to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics."

The heroes of Turner's thesis are the farmers, those who come right after the hunter/trapper pathfinders. In his eyes they are the first step toward civilization, and when they arrive the boundary of the frontier moves

westward. In a broad sense, the notion of the frontier was the edge of the settled country where unlimited free land was available and thus unlimited opportunity.

While Turner did not create the myth of the frontier, he gave voice to it, and his frontier thesis was a major contribution to the general acceptance of the myth by scholars in the twentieth century. The focus on the West, and particularly the idealized concept of the frontier, placed those areas as foundational for American identity. Rather than looking to the Eastern city, such as Boston or Philadelphia, as the epitome of American ideals and values, the focus of American history and identity was on the farmers who were slowly but steadily moving farther west, searching for land and a modest income. Turner's influence can be seen in nearly every single work of Western history to follow, either dealt with directly or indirectly, particularly each time a scholar uses the word frontier.

### **The Work of Richard Slotkin**

As noted above, Richard Slotkin has devoted a career to studying the myth of the frontier, writing three books on the subject, *Regeneration Through Violence*, *Fatal Environment*, and *Gunfighter Nation*. Slotkin's goal throughout this trilogy is to trace the myth of the frontier from the original colonies to the popular culture works of the twentieth century, tracing the evolution and influence of the myth (as further explained below). Throughout these works Slotkin defines myth as "a set of narratives that acquire through specifiable historical action a significant ideological charge." This definition is useful in understanding how scholars study myth, and why the myth of the frontier is significant. Slotkin's definition evolves throughout the trilogy, beginning with the general understanding of the myth of the frontier as viewing America as a land of opportunity for the strong to conquer, then incorporating capitalist exploitation of the land as America evolved into an industrialist nation, finally being used a vehicle for cultural ideology in the twentieth century era in popular culture.

### **Overview**

There are two 'Wests' - the historical West in which farmers, ranchers, miners, prostitutes and criminals pursued their happiness, and the mythic West that took deep root in the American imagination. Western novels (dime novels, pulp fiction), mainstream literature (Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*), newspapers, and plays portrayed the West as both a barren landscape full of savages and a romanticized idealistic way of living for rugged men.

Being a frontiersman in the so-called Wild West, a cowboy, rancher or gold miner were idealized within American mystery. Mark Twain colorfully related

that accounts of gold strikes in the popular press had supported the feverish expansion of the mining frontier and provoked mining "stampedes" during the 1860s and 1870s: "Every few days news would come of the discovery of a brand-new mining region: immediately the papers would teem with accounts of its richness, and away the surplus population would scamper to take possession..."

Similarly the life of the hardy cowboy driving dusty herds of longhorns northward from Texas to the cattle markets Abilene and Dodge City, Kansas, was romanticized by the eastern press. This transformed the cattle industry until the late 1870s. The former image of cowboys as ne'er-do-well and drifter changed significantly. They were now glorified as men of rough-hewn integrity and self-reliant strength.

## QUESTIONS

### ■ Short Answers Type Questions

1. What was the main idea of *The Frontier* thesis?
2. What is the best definition for the term American frontier?
3. What are the characteristics of a frontier?
4. What is an example of a frontier?

### ■ Long Answers Type Questions

1. What did *The Frontier* mean to the American?
2. What is the main idea of the significance of *The Frontier* in American history?
3. What is *The Frontier* in American literature?
4. How did *The Frontier* shape American culture and society?



## CHAPTER

# 4

### THE SCARLET LETTER (Nathaniel Hawthorne)

#### The Custom-House : Introductory

##### Summary

Hawthorne begins *The Scarlet Letter* with a long introductory essay that generally functions as a preface but, more specifically, accomplishes four significant goals: outlines autobiographical information about the author, describes the conflict between the artistic impulse and the commercial environment, defines the romance novel (which Hawthorne is credited with refining and mastering), and authenticates the basis of the novel by explaining that he had discovered in the Salem Custom House the faded scarlet A and the parchment sheets that contained the historical manuscript on which the novel is based.

##### Analysis

The preface sets the atmosphere of the story and connects the present with the past. Hawthorne's description of the Salem port of the 1800s is directly related to the past history of the area. The Puritans who first settled in Massachusetts in the 1600s founded a colony that concentrated on God's teachings and their mission to live by His word. But this philosophy was eventually swallowed up by the commercialism and financial interests of the 1700s.

The clashing of the past and present is further explored in the character of the old General. The old General's heroic qualities include a distinguished name, perseverance, integrity, compassion, and moral inner strength. He is "the soul and spirit of New England hardihood." Now put out to pasture, he sometimes presides over the Custom House run by corrupt public servants, who skip work to sleep, allow or overlook smuggling, and are supervised by an inspector with "no power of thought, nor depth of feeling, no troublesome sensibilities," who is honest enough but without a spiritual compass.

A further connection to the past is his discussion of his ancestors. Hawthorne has ambivalent feelings about their role in his life. In his autobiographical sketch, Hawthorne describes his ancestors as "dim and dusky," "grave, bearded, sable-cloaked, and steel crowned," "bitter persecutors" whose "better deeds" will be diminished by their bad ones. There

can be little doubt of Hawthorne's disdain for the stern morality and rigidity of the Puritans, and he imagines his predecessors' disdainful view of him: unsuccessful in their eyes, worthless and disgraceful. "A writer of story books!" But even as he disagrees with his ancestor's viewpoint, he also feels an instinctual connection to them and, more importantly, a "sense of place" in Salem. Their blood remains in his veins, but their intolerance and lack of humanity becomes the subject of his novel.

This ambivalence in his thoughts about his ancestors and his hometown is paralleled by his struggle with the need to exercise his artistic talent and the reality of supporting a family. Hawthorne wrote to his sister Elizabeth in 1820, "No man can be a Poet and a Bookkeeper at the same time." Hawthorne's references to Emerson, Thoreau, Channing, and other romantic authors describe an intellectual life he longs to regain. His job at the Custom House stifles his creativity and imagination. The scarlet letter touches his soul (he actually feels heat radiate from it), and while "the reader may smile," Hawthorne feels a tugging that haunts him like his ancestors.

In this preface, Hawthorne also shares his definition of the romance novel as he attempts to imagine Hester Prynne's story beyond Pue's manuscript account. A careful reading of this section explains the author's use of light (chiaroscuro) and setting as romance techniques in developing his themes. Hawthorne explains that, in a certain light and time and place, objects "... seem to lose their actual substance, and become things of intellect." He asserts that, at the right time with the right scene before him, the romance writer can "dream strange things and make them look like truth."

Finally, the preface serves as means of authenticating the novel by explaining that Hawthorne had discovered in the Salem Custom House the faded scarlet A and the parchment sheets that contained the historical manuscript on which the novel is based. However, we know of no serious, scholarly work that suggests Hawthorne was ever actually in possession of the letter or the manuscript. This technique, typical of the narrative conventions of his time, serves as a way of giving his story an air of historic truth. Furthermore, Hawthorne, in his story, "Endicott and the Red Cross," published nine years before he took his Custom House position, described the incident of a woman who, like Hester Prynne, was forced to wear a letter A on her breast.

## **Chapter 1 : The Prison-Door**

### **Summary**

In this first chapter, Hawthorne sets the scene of the novel - Boston of the seventeenth century. It is June, and a throng of drably dressed Puritans stands before a weather-beaten wooden prison. In front of the prison stands an

unsightly plot of weeds, and beside it grows a wild rosebush, which seems out of place in this scene dominated by dark colors.

### **Analysis**

In this chapter, Hawthorne sets the mood for the “tale of human frailty and sorrow” that is to follow. His first paragraph introduces the reader to what some might want to consider a (or the) major character of the work: the Puritan society. What happens to each of the major characters - Hester, Pearl, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth - results from the collective ethics, morals, psyche, and unwavering sternness and rigidity of the individual Puritans, whom Hawthorne introduces figuratively in this chapter and literally and individually in the next.

Dominating this chapter are the decay and ugliness of the physical setting, which symbolize the Puritan society and culture and foreshadow the gloom of the novel. The two landmarks mentioned, the prison and the cemetery, point not only to the “practical necessities” of the society, but also to the images of punishment and providence that dominate this culture and permeate the entire story.

The rosebush, its beauty a striking contrast to all that surrounds it - as later the beautifully embroidered scarlet A will be - is held out in part as an invitation to find “some sweet moral blossom” in the ensuing, tragic tale and in part as an image that “the deep heart of nature” (perhaps God) may look more kindly on the errant Hester and her child (the roses among the weeds) than do her Puritan neighbors. Throughout the work, the nature images contrast with the stark darkness of the Puritans and their systems.

Hawthorne makes special note that this colony earlier set aside land for both a cemetery and a prison, a sign that all societies, regardless of their good intentions, eventually succumb to the realities of man’s nature (sinful/punishment/prison) and destiny (mortal/death/cemetery). In those societies in which the church and state are the same, when man breaks the law, he also sins. From Adam and Eve on, man’s inability to obey the rules of the society has been his downfall.

The Puritan society is symbolized in the first chapter by the plot of weeds growing so profusely in front of the prison. Nevertheless, nature also includes things of beauty, represented by the wild rosebush. The rosebush is a strong image developed by Hawthorne which, to the sophisticated reader, may sum up the whole work. First it is wild; that is, it is of nature, God given, or springing from the “footsteps of the sainted Anne Hutchinson.” Second, according to the author, it is beautiful - offering “fragrant and fragile beauty to the prisoner” - in a field of “unsightly vegetation.” Third, it is a “token that the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to” the prisoner entering the structure or the

"condemned criminal as he came forth to his doom." Finally, it is a predominant image throughout the romance. Much the same sort of descriptive analyses that can be written about the rosebush could be ascribed to the scarlet letter itself or to little Pearl or, perhaps, even to the act of love that produced them both.

Finally, the author points toward many of the images that are significant to an understanding of the novel. In this instance, he names the chapter "The Prison Door." The reader needs to pay particular attention to the significance of the prison generally and the prison door specifically. The descriptive language in reference to the prison door-"... heavily timbered with oak, and studded with iron spikes" and the "rust on the ponderous iron-work ... looked more antique than anything else in the New World" and, again, " ... seemed never to have known a youthful era"-foreshadows and sets the tone for the tale that follows.

## **Chapter 2 : The Market-Place**

### **Summary**

The Puritan women waiting outside the prison self-righteously and viciously discuss Hester Prynne and her sin. Hester, proud and beautiful, emerges from the prison. She wears an elaborately embroidered scarlet letter A - standing for "adultery"-on her breast, and she carries a three-month-old infant in her arms.

Hester is led through the unsympathetic crowd to the scaffold of the pillory. Standing alone on the scaffold as punishment for her adulterous behavior, she remembers her past life in England and on the European continent. Suddenly becoming aware of the stern faces looking up at her, Hester painfully realizes her present position of shame and punishment.

### **Analysis**

Although the reader actually meets only Hester and her infant daughter, Pearl, in this chapter, Hawthorne begins his characterization of all four of the novel's major characters. He describes Hester physically, and he tells about her background, illustrating her pride and shame. Then we see Pearl and hear her cry out when her mother fiercely clutches her at the end of the chapter. Although Pearl is one of the physical symbols of Hester's sin (the other is the scarlet A), she is much more than that. She is the product of an act of love - socially forbidden love as it may have been - but love still. This is why Pearl, as we later learn, is not amenable to social rules. She was conceived in an act that was intolerable in the Puritan code and society.

In addition to Hester and Pearl's appearance, we get our first glimpse of the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth, the novel's other

two main characters. Although the irony of Dimmesdale's relationship to Hester is not yet apparent, his grief over his parishioner Hester is commented on by one of the women assembled near the prison who notes that Dimmesdale "takes it very grievously to heart that such a scandal should have come upon his congregation." And, although Roger Chillingworth is not yet named, we are given a rather full characterization of the man through Hester's recollections of him. He is the "misshapen scholar" who is Hester's legal husband.

This Chapter also contains a description of the Puritan society and reveals Hawthorne's critical attitude toward it. The smugly pious attitude of the women assembled in front of the prison who condemn Hester is frightening - especially when we hear them suggest that Hester should be scalded with a hot iron applied to her forehead to mark her as a "hussy," an immoral woman. Although this scene vividly dramatizes what Hawthorne found objectionable about early American Puritanism, he avoids over-generalizing here by including the comments of a good-hearted young wife to show that not all Puritan women were as bitter and pugnaciously pious as these "gossips." The young woman's soft remarks of sympathy for Hester's suffering contrast sharply with the comments of the majority of the women. It is important to note, however, that even this young mother has brought her child to witness the punishment, passing these morals and behaviors to the next generation.

When Hester appears with Pearl, she is in stark contrast to the gloom and the grim reality of the crowd. She has a natural grace and dignity and rejects the arm of the beadle, walking into the sunlight on her own. The most startling part of her appearance is the scarlet letter A on her dress. What is meant to be a badge of shame is elaborately decorated in threads of gold. It goes far beyond the standards of richness-sumptuary laws-decreed by the colony. Her extraordinary appearance defies the order of the governor and the ministers. The scarlet letter is "fantastically embroidered and illuminated" and takes "her out of the ordinary relations with humanity" and into a sphere all her own. The red of the letter, standing for adultery, reminds the reader of the rosebush and the letter that later appears in the sky. Its color, for now at least, is associated with her sin and will be strongly connected to Pearl throughout the novel.

Stylistically, the chapter employs a somewhat heavy historical narrative, occasionally interrupted by Hawthorne's comments. It also uses such symbols as the beadle, the scarlet letter A, and Pearl. In fact, many of the novel's themes become apparent by investigating the images and symbols represented in the characters, physical objects, and larger social issues. For example, the beadle, or town crier, who carries a sword and walks with a staff symbolic of religious - and therefore social - authority, is described as "grim and grisly." This description also characterizes, both the atmosphere in Chapter 2 and, more



important, the society of which the beadle is a part. As the novel progresses, Pearl, the offspring of Hester's adulterous affair, becomes more strongly linked to the scarlet letter A that Hester wears on her clothing; likewise, both Pearl's and the A's symbolism are also more fully developed.

### **Chapter 3 : The Recognition**

#### **Summary**

Hester recognizes a small, rather deformed man standing on the outskirts of the crowd and clutches Pearl fiercely to her bosom. Meanwhile, the man, a stranger to Boston, recognizes Hester and is horror-struck.

Inquiring, the man learns of Hester's history, her crime (adultery), and her sentence: to stand on the scaffold for three hours and to wear the symbolic letter A for the rest of her life. The stranger also learns that Hester refuses to name the man with whom she had the sexual affair. This knowledge greatly upsets him, and he vows that Hester's unnamed partner "will be known! - he will be known! - he will be known!"

The Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale, visibly upset, pleads with Hester to name her accomplice. He tells her that she should name her partner in sin because perhaps the man doesn't have the courage to step forward even if he wants to. Yet despite Dimmesdale's passionate appeal, followed by harsher demands from the Reverend Mr. Wilson and from a stern voice in the crowd (presumably that of the deformed stranger), Hester steadfastly refuses to name the father of her child. After a long and tedious sermon by the Reverend Mr. Wilson, during which Hester tries ineffectively to quiet Pearl's crying, she is led back to prison.

#### **Analysis**

The novel's other two principal characters now make their first physical appearance, and the tensions of the story begin to develop. In Chapter 4, the reader learns that the stranger who so terrifies Hester calls himself Roger Chillingworth, a pseudonym he has chosen for himself. In reality, he is Roger Prynne, the husband whom Hester fears meeting face to face. The other principal character is the young Reverend Dimmesdale, who pleads with Hester to name the father of her infant daughter; Dimmesdale is Pearl's father.

Hawthorne's portrayal of Chillingworth emphasizes his physical deformity. More important, Chillingworth's misshapen body reflects (or symbolizes) the evil in his soul, which builds as the novel progresses. In this chapter, Hawthorne provides hints of just how obsessed Chillingworth will become with punishing Dimmesdale. For example, when Chillingworth recognizes Hester standing alone on the scaffold, "a writhing horror twisted itself across his features, like a snake gliding swiftly over them ..."

Characteristic of Chillingworth, he internalizes "into the depths of his nature" this external convulsion, which will feed his appetite for revenge throughout the novel. The image of the snake is apt when we recall the serpent in the biblical Garden of Eden and the carnal knowledge that it represents. From this chapter forward, revenge and punishment for Dimmesdale will be Chillingworth's only consuming passion.

Dimmesdale's one-paragraph speech to Hester reveals more about his character than any description of his physical body and nervous habits that Hawthorne provides. Knowing that he was Hester's sexual partner and is Pearl's father, the speech that he gives is ripe with double meanings. On one level, he gives a public chastisement of Hester for not naming her lover; on another level, he makes a personal plea to her to name him as her lover and Pearl's father because he is too morally weak to do so himself. Ironically, what is initially intended to be a speech about Hester becomes more a commentary about his own sinful behavior.

In his speech, Dimmesdale asks Hester to recognize his "accountability" in addressing her, and he begs her to do what he cannot do himself. Publicly, he is her spiritual leader, and, as such, he is responsible for her moral behavior. Privately, however, he was her lover, and he shares the blame of the horrible situation that she is in. He then admonishes her, as her spiritual leader, to name her accomplice so that her soul might find peace on earth and, more important, so that she might better her chance for salvation after her death. When he then goes on to "charge" her with naming the transgressor, we understand that he is privately pleading with her to expose him publicly and thereby help ensure his salvation, for without public repentance salvation is not attainable.

The dichotomy between Dimmesdale's public speech and personal meaning is most evident in the phrase "believe me." This phrase comes directly following his plea that Hester not take into consideration any feelings she might still have for him. It also follows acknowledgment - privately to himself, but through public speech - that it would be better for him to step down "from a high place" and publicly stand beside her on the scaffold. Ultimately, his official, public duty and his private, personal intention are one and the same: to admonish Hester to expose her lover's - his own - immorality because he is too morally weak to do so himself.

## **Chapter 4 : The Interview**

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### **Summary**

Back in her prison cell, Hester is in a state of nervous frenzy, and Pearl writhes in painful convulsions. That evening, when Roger Chillingworth enters

Hester's prison cell, she fears his intentions, but he gives Pearl a draught of medicine that eases the child's pain almost immediately, and she falls asleep. After he persuades Hester to drink a sedative to calm her frayed nerves, the two sit and talk intimately and sympathetically, each of them accepting a measure of blame for Hester's adulterous affair.

Chillingworth, the injured husband, seeks no revenge against Hester, but he is determined to discover the father of Pearl. Although this unidentified man doesn't wear a scarlet A on his clothes as Hester does, Chillingworth vows that he will "read it on his heart." He then makes Hester promise not to reveal his identity. Hester takes an oath to keep Chillingworth's identity a secret, although she expresses the fear that her vow of silence may prove the ruin of her soul.

### **Analysis**

Unlike the previous chapter, Hawthorne does not summarize or discuss the actions of his characters, nor does he tell the readers what to think. Instead, he puts Hester and Chillingworth together and lets the reader learn about their attitudes and their relationship to each other through their dialogue. By juxtaposing heavily prosaic chapters, like Chapter 3, with ones dominated by the characters' dialogue, Hawthorne creates a pattern in the novel that heightens the dramatic content of the dialogic chapters.

Chapter 4 is especially important to understanding Chillingworth. Hawthorne gives a view of what he has been as well as what he is to become. Throughout the novel, he is referred to as a scholar, a man most interested in studying - reading about - human behavior. Unfortunately, however, Chillingworth hints that in his pursuit of scholarship, he has failed both Hester and himself. He admits to her, "I betrayed thy budding youth into a false and unnatural relation with my decay." We can initially sympathize with this lonely scholar who has been robbed of his wife, but we also can see the element of his future self-destruction in his grim determination to discover the man who has offended him. In fact, as Hester and Chillingworth continue their conversation, we see the development of Chillingworth as one of the novel's symbols of evil.

Of Hester, we learn that she has never pretended to love her husband but that she deeply loves the man whom Chillingworth has vowed to punish. Ironically, it is Hester's concern for Dimmesdale, more than her sense of obligation to her marriage, that persuades her to promise never to reveal that Chillingworth is her husband. This promise will make both Hester and Dimmesdale suffer greatly later in the book.

## Chapter 5 : Hester at Her Needle

### Summary

Her term of imprisonment over, Hester is now free to go anywhere in the world, yet she does not leave Boston; instead, she chooses to move into a small, seaside cottage on the outskirts of town. She supports herself and Pearl through her skill as a seamstress. Her work is in great demand for clothing worn at official ceremonies and among the fashionable women of the town - for every occasion except a wedding.

Despite the popularity of her sewing, however, Hester is a social outcast. The target of vicious abuse by the community, she endures the abuse patiently. Ironically, she begins to believe that the scarlet A allows her to sense sinful and immoral feelings in other people.

### Analysis

Chapter 5 serves the purposes of filling in background information about Hester and Pearl and beginning the development of Hester and the scarlet as two of the major symbols of the romance. By positioning Hester's cottage between the town and the wilderness, physically isolated from the community, the author confirms and builds the image of her that was portrayed in the first scaffold scene - that of an outcast of society being punished for her sin/crime and as a product of nature. Society views her "... as the figure, the body, the reality of sin."

Despite Hester's apparent humility and her refusal to strike back at the community, she resents and inwardly rebels against the viciousness of her Puritan persecutors. She becomes a living symbol of sin to the townspeople, who view her not as an individual but as the embodiment of evil in the world. Twice in this chapter, Hawthorne alludes to the community's using Hester's errant behavior as a testament of immorality. For moralists, she represents woman's frailty and sinful passion, and when she attends church, she is often the subject of the preacher's sermon.

Banished by society to live her life forever as an outcast, Hester's skill in needlework is nevertheless in great demand. Hawthorne derisively condemns Boston's Puritan citizens throughout the novel, but here in Chapter 5 his criticism is especially sharp. The very community members most appalled by Hester's past conduct favor her sewing skills, but they deem their demand for her work almost as charity, as if they are doing her the favor in having her sew garments for them. Their small-minded and contemptuous attitudes are best exemplified in their refusal to allow Hester to sew garments for weddings, as if she would contaminate the sacredness of marriage were she to do so.



The irony between the townspeople's condemnation of Hester and her providing garments for them is even greater when we learn that Hester is not overly proud of her work. Although Hester has what Hawthorne terms "a taste for the gorgeously beautiful," she rejects ornamentation as a sin. We must remember that Hester, no matter how much she inwardly rebels against the hypocrisy of Puritan society, still conforms to the moral strictness associated with Puritanism.

The theme of public and private disclosure that so greatly marked Dimmesdale's speech in Chapter 3 is again present in this chapter, but this time the scarlet A on Hester's clothing is associated with the theme. Whereas publicly the letter inflicts scorn on Hester, it also endows her with a new, private sense of others' own sinful thoughts and behavior; she gains a "sympathetic knowledge of the hidden sin in other hearts." The scarlet letter - what it represents - separates Hester from society, but it enables her to recognize sin in the very same society that banishes her. Hawthorne uses this dichotomy to point out the hypocritical nature of Puritanism: Those who condemn Hester are themselves condemnable according to their own set of values. Similar to Hester's becoming a living symbol of immoral behavior, the scarlet A becomes an object with a life seemingly its own : Whenever Hester is in the presence of a person who is masking a personal sin, "the red infamy upon her breast would give a sympathetic throb."

In the Custom House preface, Hawthorne describes his penchant for mixing fantasy with fact, and this technique is evident in his treatment of the scarlet A. In physical terms, this emblem is only so much fabric and thread. But Hawthorne's use of the symbol at various points in the story adds a dimension of fantasy to factual description. In the Custom House, Hawthorne claims to have "experienced a sensation ... as if the letter were not of red cloth, but red-hot iron." Similarly, here in Chapter 5, he suggests that, at least according to some townspeople, the scarlet A literally sears Hester's chest and that, "red-hot with infernal fire," it glows in the dark at night. These accounts create doubt in the reader's mind regarding the true nature and function of the symbol. Hawthorne's imbuing the scarlet A with characteristics that are both fantastical and symbolic is evident throughout the novel - particularly when Chillingworth sees a scarlet A emblazoned on Dimmesdale's bare chest and when townspeople see a giant scarlet A in the sky-and is a technique common to the romance genre.

## **Chapter 6 : Pearl**

### **Summary**

During her first three years, Pearl, who is so named because she came "of great price," grows into a physically beautiful, vigorous, and graceful little girl.

She is radiant in the rich and elaborate dresses that Hester sews for her. Inwardly, however, Pearl possesses a complex character. She shows an unusual depth of mind, coupled with a fiery passion that Hester is incapable of controlling either with kindness or threats. Pearl shows a love of mischief and a disrespect for authority, which frequently reminds Hester of her own sin of passion.

Because both Hester and Pearl are excluded from society, they are constant companions. When Pearl is on walks with her mother, she occasionally finds herself surrounded by the curious children of the village. Rather than attempt to make friends with them, she pelts them with stones and violent words.

Pearl's only companion in her playtime is her imagination. Significantly, in her games of make-believe, she never creates friends; she creates only enemies - Puritans whom she pretends to destroy. But the object that most captures her imagination is the scarlet letter A on her mother's clothing. Hester worries that Pearl is possessed by a fiend, an impression strengthened when Pearl denies having a Heavenly Father and then laughingly demands that Hester tell her where she came from.

### **Analysis**

This chapter develops Pearl both as a character and as a symbol. Pearl is a mischievous and almost unworldly child, whose uncontrollable nature reflects the sinful passion that led to her birth. Pearl's character is closely tied to her birth, which justifies and makes the "other worldliness" about her very important. She is a product and a symbol of the act of adultery, an act of love, an act of passion, a sin, and a crime. Hawthorne, the narrator, states, "[Pearl] was worthy to have been brought forth in Eden; worthy to have been left there, to be the plaything of the angels ..." However, she "lacked reference and adaptation to the world into which she was born."

The Puritan community believed extramarital sex to be inherently evil and influenced by the devil, and, because Pearl is a product of her mother's extramarital sex, Hawthorne raises the issue of Pearl's nature. Can something good come from something evil? Is Pearl inherently evil because she was born from what the Puritans conceived to be an immoral, sinful union? Perhaps, thinks Hester, who is fearful at least of such a predetermined outcome. Our modern sensibilities, however, shudder at the implication that an immoral act between two adults necessarily means that a child born from that sexual affair will be inherently evil.

Hawthorne's condemnation of Puritanism continues in this chapter. His strongest rebuttal of the society's self-serving, false piety occurs when he ironically contrasts the Puritan community's treatment of Hester and God's



treatment of her. He notes of Hester's fellow citizens, "Man had marked this woman's sin by a scarlet letter, which had such potent and disastrous efficacy that no human sympathy could reach her, save it were sinful like herself." Ironically juxtaposed against the Puritan's sentence that Hester wear the scarlet letter A is "God, [who] as a direct consequence of the sin which man thus punished, had given her a lovely child, ... to be finally a blessed soul in heaven!" The comparison between the community's (Puritan's) and God's responses to Hester's extramarital affair is dramatic.

## **Chapter 7 : The Governor's Hall**

### **Summary**

Hester has heard that certain influential citizens feel Pearl should be taken from her. Alarmed, Hester sets out with Pearl for Governor Bellingham's mansion to deliver gloves that he ordered. More important, however, Hester plans to plead for the right to keep her daughter.

Pearl has been especially dressed for the occasion in an elaborate scarlet dress, embroidered with gold thread. On the way to the governor's mansion, Hester and Pearl are accosted by a group of Puritan children. When they taunt Pearl, she shows a temper as fiery as her appearance, driving the children off with her screams and threats.

Reaching the Governor's large, elaborate, stucco frame dwelling, Hester and Pearl are admitted by a bondsman. Inside a heavy oak hall, Hester and Pearl stand before Governor Bellingham's suit of armor. In its curved, polished breastplate, both Hester's scarlet A and Pearl are distorted. Meanwhile, as Hester contemplates her daughter's changed image, a small group of men approaches. Pearl becomes quiet out of curiosity about the men who are coming down the path.

### **Analysis**

In addition to preparing the way for the dramatic and crucial interview to come between Hester and the governor, this chapter displays Hawthorne's imagination in developing Pearl's strange nature and the scarlet symbol. Like a symphony with variations, the assorted scarlet references in this chapter add to the richness of the letter's meaning.

Hester comes to Governor Bellingham's house because she has heard that people - particularly the governor - want to deprive her of Pearl. Once again Hawthorne shows his disdain for the smug attitudes of the Puritans. They reason that their "Christian interest" requires them to remove Pearl - the product of sin - from her mother's influence. If Pearl is "capable of moral and religious growth" and perhaps even salvation, they see it as their "duty" to move her to a more trustworthy Christian influence. Hawthorne chides these

self-righteous Puritans and likens their concern to a dispute in Puritan courts involving the right of property in a pig.

Hawthorne also designs this chapter to advance the reader's knowledge of Pearl, both in appearance and actions. She is constant motion with "rich and luxuriant beauty." Her actions are full of fire and passion. When the Puritan children fling mud at Pearl, she scares them off. She is an "angel of judgement," an "infant pestilence." Once her fire is spent, she returns quietly to her mother and smiles. Her actions seem to be preternatural behavior in such a young child. Her scarlet dress, a product of Hester's imagination and needle, seems to intensify her "fire and passion." Pearl's scarlet appearance is closely associated with the scarlet letter on Hester's bosom, and Hawthorne continues this relationship as the novel unfolds.

When Hester is told the governor cannot see her immediately, she firmly tells the servant she will wait. Her determined manner indicates to the servant how strongly she feels about the issue of Pearl's guardianship. Because the servant is new in the community, he has not heard the story of the scarlet letter. The beautifully embroidered emblem on her dress and her determination cause him to think she is a person of some influence. Hawthorne emphasizes the servant's recent arrival to impress upon the reader the well-known nature of the scarlet letter's story.

Bellingham's house is described as a mansion of fantasy: cheery, gleaming, sunny, and having "never known death." It comes to life as the only interior description in the novel. Bellingham's home is a mixture of stern Puritan portraits and Old World comforts. Is it any wonder that the polished mirror of the breastplate on Bellingham's armor plays tricks on the eyes? Here in this fortress of Puritan rules where men will decide her fate, Hester virtually vanishes behind the scarlet A in the breastplate's reflection. Even Pearl's naughtiness and impish qualities are exaggerated - at least in Hester's mind - as if to defy the stifling, moralistic atmosphere of this place. The governor and his cronies arrive, and Pearl lets out an eerie scream. Their future approaches.

## **Chapter 8 : The Elf-Child and the Minister**

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### **Summary**

The group of men approaching Hester and Pearl include Governor Bellingham, the Reverend John Wilson, the Reverend Dimmesdale, and Roger Chillingworth, who, since the story's opening, has been living in Boston as Dimmesdale's friend and personal physician.

The governor, shocked at Pearl's vain and immodest costume, challenges Hester's fitness to raise the child in a Christian way. He asks Reverend Mr. Wilson to test Pearl's knowledge of the catechism. Pearl deliberately pretends

ignorance. In answer to the very first question-“Who made thee?”-Pearl replies that she was not made, but that she was “plucked .... off the bush of wild roses that grew by the prison door.”

Horried, the governor and Mr. Wilson are immediately ready to take Pearl away from Hester, who protests that God gave Pearl to her and that she will not give her up. Pearl is both her happiness and her torture, and she will die before she relinquishes her. She appeals to Dimmesdale to speak for her. Dimmesdale persuades Governor Bellingham and Mr. Wilson that Hester should be allowed to keep Pearl, whom God has given to her as both a blessing and a reminder of her sin, causing Chillingworth to remark, “You speak, my friend, with a strange earnestness.” Pearl, momentarily solemn, caresses Dimmesdale’s hand and receives from the minister a furtive kiss on the head.

Leaving the mansion, Hester is approached by Mistress Hibbins, Governor Bellingham’s sister. Hester refuses the woman’s invitation to a midnight meeting of witches in the forest, saying she must take Pearl home, but she adds that, if she had lost Pearl, she would willingly have signed on with the devil.

### **Analysis**

This chapter brings back together the major characters from the first scaffold scene - Hester, Pearl, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth - as well as representatives of the Church, the State, and the World of Darkness. Note, too, that underneath the surface action, Hawthorne offers several strong hints concerning the complex relationships of his characters. In Hester’s appealing to Dimmesdale for help, in Pearl’s solemnly caressing his hand, and in the minister’s answering kiss lie solid hints that Dimmesdale is Pearl’s father.

Hester calls on her inner strength in her attempt to keep Pearl. She argues quite eloquently that the scarlet letter is a badge of shame to teach her child wisdom and help her profit from Hester’s sin. However, Pearl’s refusal to answer the catechism question causes the decision of the Church and the State to go against her. Now Hester’s only appeal is to Dimmesdale, the man whose reputation she could crush.

Pearl once again reveals her wild and passionate nature. In saying that her mother plucked her from the wild roses that grew by the prison door, she defies both Church and State. While such an answer seems precocious for a small child, the reader must remember that Hawthorne uses characters symbolically to present meaning. Pearl’s action recalls Hester’s defiance on the scaffold when she refuses to name the father of her child. The dual nature of Pearl’s existence as both happiness and torture is restated in Hester’s plea, and this point is taken up by Dimmesdale. The minister’s weakened condition and

his obvious nervousness suggest how terribly he has been suffering with his concealed guilt.

Nevertheless, Dimmesdale adds to Hester's plea when he states that Pearl is a "child of its father's guilt and its mother's shame" but still she has come from the "hand of God." As such, she should be considered a blessing. The minister argues that Pearl will keep Hester from the powers of darkness. And so she is allowed to keep her daughter. Those powers of darkness can be seen in both the strange conversation with Mistress Hibbins and also in the change in Chillingworth.

As if to prove that Hester will be kept from the darkness by Pearl, Hawthorne adds the scene with Mistress Hibbins. While Mr. Wilson says of Pearl, "that little baggage has witchcraft in her," Hester says she would willingly have gone with the Black Man except for Pearl.

These dark powers are also suggested by the fourth main character, Chillingworth. The change noted by Hester in Chillingworth's physical appearance, now more ugly and dark and misshapen, is a hint that in the scholar's desire for revenge, evil is winning the battle within him and is reflected in his outward appearance. That Chillingworth is Dimmesdale's personal physician : and supposed friend gives him the opportunity to apply psychological pressure on the minister. Chillingworth's comment on Dimmesdale's strange earnestness and his statement that he could make a "shrewd guess at the father" suggest that he may already have decided on Dimmesdale's guilt.

The battlefield has been marked : The forces of light and darkness are vying for human souls.

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## Chapter 9 : The Leech

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### Summary

Since first appearing in the community, Chillingworth has been well received by the townspeople, not only because they can use his services as a physician, but also because of his special interest in their ailing clergyman, Arthur Dimmesdale. In fact, some of the Puritans even view it as a special act of Providence that a man of Chillingworth's knowledge should have been "dropped," as it were, into their community just when their beloved young minister's health seemed to be failing. And, although Dimmesdale protests that he needs no medicine and is prepared to die if it is the will of God, he agrees to put his health in Chillingworth's hands. The two men begin spending much time together and, finally, at Chillingworth's suggestion, they move into the same house, where, although they have separate apartments, they can move back and forth freely.



Gradually, some of the townspeople, without any real evidence except for the growing appearance of evil in Chillingworth's face, begin to develop suspicions about the doctor. Rumors about his past and suggestions that he practices "the black art" with fire brought from hell gain some acceptance. Many of the townspeople also believe that, rather than being in the care of a Christian physician, Arthur Dimmesdale is in the hands of Satan or one of his agents who has been given God's permission to struggle with the minister's soul for a time. Despite the look of gloom and terror in Dimmesdale's eyes, all of them have faith that Dimmesdale's strength is certain to bring him victory over his tormentor.

### **Analysis**

The theme of good and evil battling is carried through in Chapter 9, "The Leech," a ponderous and philosophical chapter with little action and much positioning of characters. We see the double meaning of the word "leech," the decline of Dimmesdale under his weight of guilt, the development of his relationship with Chillingworth, and the point of view of the townspeople, which have strikingly opposing opinions about the influence of Chillingworth on the minister. As he ingratiates himself with the young minister, and the town sees Chillingworth as "a brilliant acquisition." On the other hand, they suspect that the relationship and proximity of Chillingworth and Dimmesdale have led to Dimmesdale's deterioration.

Hawthorne purposely uses the old-fashioned term "leech" for "physician" because of its obvious double meaning. As a doctor, Chillingworth seems to be making complicated medicines that he learned at the feet of the Indians; he also appears to be sucking the life out of Dimmesdale.

Chillingworth's devious and evil nature is developed in this chapter. As he moves into a home with Dimmesdale and the two freely discuss their concerns, there begins to develop "a kind of intimacy" between them. To Dimmesdale, Chillingworth is the "sympathetic" listener and intellectual whose mind and interests appeal to him. The reader, however, is told that, from the time Chillingworth arrived in Boston, he has "a new purpose, dark, it is true." As Chillingworth becomes more and more absorbed in practicing "the black art," the townspeople notice the physical changes in him, and they begin to see "something ugly and evil in his face." His laboratory seems to be warmed with "infernal fuel," and the fire, which also leaves a sooty film on the physician's face, appears to come from hell.

As the people in town watch this struggle, they feel that this disciple of Satan cannot win and that the goodness of Dimmesdale will prevail. Dimmesdale, however, is not so sure. Each Sunday, he is thinner and paler, struggling under the unrevealed guilt of his deed. The occasional habit of

pressing his hand to his ailing heart has now become a constant gesture. He turns down suggestions of a wife as a helpmate, and some parishioners associate his illness with his strong devotion to God. Dimmesdale, although he discusses the secrets of his soul with his physician, never reveals the ultimate secret that Chillingworth is obsessed with hearing. Their relationship is further explored in the next few chapters.

## **Chapter 10 : The Leech and His Patient**

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### **Summary**

In this and the next few chapters, Chillingworth investigates the identity of Pearl's father for the sole purpose of taking revenge. Adopting the attitude of a judge seeking truth and justice, he quickly becomes fiercely obsessed by his search into Dimmesdale's heart. He is frequently discouraged in his attempts to pry loose Dimmesdale's secret, but he always returns to his "digging" with all his intelligence and passion.

Most of Chapter 10 concerns the pulling and tugging by Chillingworth at the heart and soul of Dimmesdale. One day in Chillingworth's study, they are interrupted in their earnest discussion by Pearl and Hester's voices outside in the graveyard. They comment on Pearl's strange behavior and then return to their discussion. Watching Hester and Pearl depart, Dimmesdale agrees with Chillingworth that Hester is better off with her sin publicly displayed than she would be with it concealed.

When Chillingworth renews his probing of Dimmesdale's conscience, suggesting that he can never cure Dimmesdale as long as the minister conceals anything, the minister says that his sickness is a "sickness of the soul" and passionately cries out that he will not reveal his secret to "an earthly physician." Dimmesdale rushes from the room, and Chillingworth smiles at his success.

One day, not long afterward, Chillingworth finds Dimmesdale asleep in a chair. Pulling aside the minister's vestment, he stares at the clergyman's chest. What he sees there causes "a wild look of wonder, joy, and horror," and he does a spontaneous dance of ecstasy.

### **Analysis**

This chapter allows the reader to witness Chillingworth's evil determination to accomplish his revenge on and to increase the painful inner suffering of young Arthur Dimmesdale. The reader is also given the best insight yet into the nature of Dimmesdale's tortured battle with himself. Clearly, the struggle within his soul is destroying him, as evidenced by his physical appearance and his mental anguish, yet he still cannot confess his role in the adulterous affair with Hester. It should be noted that Dimmesdale



articulates his justification for his silence, but, in the face of Chillingworth's diabolical logic and questioning intended to manipulate the minister into a confession of his sin, Dimmesdale breaks off the colloquy.

Hawthorne refers in this chapter to Chillingworth's earlier reputation as once a "pure and upright man." His shadowy and fiendish descriptions and images of him, however, further develop his symbolic representation of one who now appears to be doing the work of the devil. Just as he was earlier connected to the devil by soot and fire, now Hawthorne uses an allusion to the door of hell in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and a reference to the breach of physician-patient relationship and trust in describing Chillingworth as "a thief entering a chamber where a man lies only half asleep" to further emphasize his evilness.

The methodical and devious scholar argues by example and innuendo that Dimmesdale should not die with sin on his conscience; confession will offer him relief in this life and the next. He further argues that the minister cannot serve his fellow man while he has terrible secrets in his soul. Dimmesdale at first resists these arguments saying that they are all fantasy. He feels that people have been able to help their fellow men despite spotted consciences. The minister is a match for Chillingworth until a new sound enters the room.

Pearl's voice comes through the chamber window. She is skipping about on the gravestones in the cemetery and even dancing on one. While Hester tries to restrain her, Pearl will not be controlled by human rules. She calls out to her mother that the minister is already in the grip of the Black Man, and she mischievously throws the burrs at him that she has been using to decorate her mother's token of sin. Chillingworth says, "There is no law, nor reverence for authority, no regard for human ordinances or opinions, right or wrong, mixed up in that child's composition." Dimmesdale agrees, except that she has "the freedom of a broken law."

Following this interruption, Chillingworth asks if Hester is not better off for having confessed her sin rather than hiding it. The young minister agrees, but remains steadfast in his refusal to confess to an earthly doctor rather than talking with God. Because of Chillingworth's constant probing, Dimmesdale becomes angry and rushes from the room.

Later, the minister is asleep in a chair and Chillingworth makes his dark discovery. The spectacular but mysterious reference to Dimmesdale's chest, at the end of the chapter, is an important "clue" that we should remember when we reach Chapter 23. At this point, Chillingworth has identified his quarry.

In this chapter, Hawthorne further develops an important thematic purpose by establishing a firm connection between the body and the soul, the external representation of the inner character ("A strange sympathy betwixt

soul and body"). The reader is explicitly lead to interpret the appearances and actions of the characters symbolically with the description of Chillingworth's appearance and actions as he uncovers the secret that lay on Dimmesdale's bosom. The major characters, in fact, are more important as symbols than real people. If their actions seem extraordinary or preternatural to one's sense of reality, he should look carefully to the development of the symbol where objects "loose their actual substance, and become things of intellect."

## **Chapter 11 : The Interior of a Heart**

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### **Summary**

Feeling that he is in full possession of Dimmesdale's secret, Chillingworth begins his unrelenting torture of the minister, subtly tormenting him with comments designed to trigger fear and agony. Dimmesdale does not realize Chillingworth's motives, but he nonetheless comes to fear and abhor him.

As Dimmesdale's suffering becomes more painful and his body grows weaker, his popularity among the congregation grows stronger. Such mistaken adoration, however, further tortures Dimmesdale and brings him often to the point of making a public confession that he is Pearl's father. The minister's sermons are eloquent, but his vague assertions of his own sinful nature are taken by his parishioners as further evidence of his holiness.

Because Dimmesdale is incapable of confessing that he was Hester's lover and that he is Pearl's father - the one act necessary to his salvation - he substitutes self-punishment. He beats himself with a bloody whip and keeps frequent all-night vigils during which his mind is plagued by frightening visions. On one such night while he is seeking peace, Dimmesdale dresses carefully in his clerical clothes and leaves the house.

### **Analysis**

This chapter and the previous one give an in-depth description of a heart "of human frailty and sorrow." The focus of this chapter continues to be Dimmesdale's painful agony, as he writhes beneath the burden of a guilt he seems powerless to confess. Along with strong characterizations of Dimmesdale and Chillingworth, Hawthorne makes two additions to the plot in this chapter : first, the confirmation that Chillingworth no longer has doubts about the minister's guilt; thus, he has undertaken a planned (and successful) campaign to wreak vengeance on the man who seduced his wife and fathered a child by her; second, a specific statement about the methods and degrees of Dimmesdale's own self-punishment.

Hawthorne's irony is evident again in the clever paradox of Dimmesdale's futile attempts at public confession. His suffering has given him sympathies that cause him to understand the sins of others, which results in eloquent and

moving sermons. The more Dimmesdale asserts his own sinfulness, the holier his congregation believes him to be. The clergyman is aware that his inadequate confessions are being misunderstood; in fact, he is consciously taking advantage of that misunderstanding: "The minister well knew - subtle, but remorseful hypocrite that he was! - the light in which his vague confession would be viewed." Thus, his sin is compounded by his actions during his period of psycho-spiritual struggle. Hawthorne ensures that readers' sympathy for Dimmesdale's suffering does not blind them to the fact that the minister is a sinner whose troubles are largely of his own making.

At the same time, the symbol of human evil, Chillingworth, appears more evil than ever in this chapter. Chillingworth, Hawthorne says, is a "poor, forlorn creature . . . more wretched than his victim." His revenge is coming at a cost : He is becoming the personification of evil.

## **Chapter 12 : The Minister's Vigil**

### **Summary**

After leaving the house, Dimmesdale walks to the scaffold where, seven years earlier, Hester Prynne stood, wearing her sign of shame and holding Pearl. Now, in the damp, cool air of the cloudy May night, Dimmesdale mounts the steps while the town sleeps. Realizing the mockery of his being able to stand there now, safe and unseen, where he should have stood seven years ago before the townspeople, Dimmesdale is overcome by a self-hatred so terrible that it causes him to cry aloud into the night.

Hester and Pearl, who are returning from Governor Winthrop's deathbed, mount the scaffold, and the three of them stand hand-in-hand, Hester and Dimmesdale linked by Pearl. Twice, Pearl asks Dimmesdale if he will stand there with them at noon the next day; the minister says he will stand there with them on "the great judgment day." As he speaks, a strange light in the sky illuminates the scaffold and its surroundings. Looking up, Dimmesdale seems to see in the sky a dull red light in the shape of an immense letter A. At the same instant, Dimmesdale is aware that Pearl is pointing toward Roger Chillingworth who stands nearby, grimly smiling up at the three people on the scaffold. Overcome with terror, Dimmesdale asks Hester about the true identity of Chillingworth. Remembering her promise to Chillingworth, Hester remains silent.

After the next morning's sermon, the sexton startles the minister by returning one of his gloves, which was found on the scaffold. ("Satan dropped it there, I take it, intending a scurrilous jest against your reverence.") The sexton also asks about the great red letter A that appeared in the sky the past night.

## Analysis

This chapter, the second of three crucial scaffold scenes, appears exactly in the middle of the novel. Again, Hawthorne gathers all of his major characters in one place - this time in a chapter so foreboding, so convincing in its psychology, and so rich in its symbolism that it is unquestionably one of the most powerful in the novel.

In his description of Dimmesdale's actions while alone on the scaffold, Hawthorne demonstrates his mastery of psychological realism. The sudden changes in mood that take place in the minister's tired mind, the self-condemnation for his cowardice, the near-insanity of his scream, and his impulse to speak to Mr. Wilson all are developed convincingly. The first scaffold scene took place during the noon hours and concentrated on Hester's guilt and punishment. This second scene, occurring at the midnight hours, puts both "sinners" on the scaffold and concentrates on Dimmesdale's guilt and punishment. All the major characters of the first scene are again present. The town, although present, sleeps or is otherwise unaware of the action.

Previously, we have seen Dimmesdale's conscious mind attempting to reason through the problem of his concealed guilt. In contrast, in this chapter, we see the tortured workings of his subconscious mind, which is the real source of his agony. When Dimmesdale is forced by Pearl's repeated question to bring the issue into the open, his fear of confession still dominates his subconscious desire to confess. Just as the town was asleep earlier and there was "no peril of discovery," now he backs off once again. His two refusals to publicly acknowledge his relationship with Hester and Pearl suggest, perhaps, Peter's first two denials of Christ.

Hawthorne's flair for Gothic detail is demonstrated in the appearance of a spectacular, weird light and the startling revelation of the diabolical Roger Chillingworth, who is standing near the scaffold. However, although both details have the effect of supernatural occurrences, Hawthorne is careful to give a natural explanation for each of them. The light, Hawthorne says, "was doubtless caused by one of those meteors, which the night-watcher may so often observe, burning out to waste."

Of course, the meteor seemed otherwise to those who saw it: "Nothing was more common, in those days, than to interpret all meteoric appearances . . . as so many revelations from a supernatural source." And the question of whether the ominous red A appeared at all is ambiguous. Although the sexton refers to the letter, Hawthorne suggests that the A may have appeared only in Dimmesdale's imagination: "We impute it . . . solely to the disease in his own eye and heart, that the minister, looking upward to the zenith, beheld there the appearance of an immense letter." Hawthorne also indicates that the meaning is in the mind of the beholder: The sexton sees it as an A for angel because Governor Winthrop had recently become an angel. Similarly, Chillingworth's



appearance, although it suggests his knowledge of Dimmesdale's whereabouts, is logically explained by his having attended the dying Governor Winthrop.

*Background Topic :  
The Frontier*

As in the first scaffold scene, this chapter abounds in both major and minor symbols: the scaffold itself; Dimmesdale's standing on it; the three potential observers representing Church, State, and the World of Evil; the "electric chain" of Hester, Pearl, and Dimmesdale; Pearl's appeal to Dimmesdale; the revealing light from the heavens; and the variation on the letter A.

## **Chapter 13 : Another View of Hester**

### **Summary**

Following her conversation with Dimmesdale on the scaffold, Hester is shocked by the changes in him. While he seems to have retained his intelligence, his nerve is gone. He is morally weak, and she can only conclude that "a terrible machinery had been brought to bear, and was still operating on Mr. Dimmesdale's well-being and repose." Hester decides she has an obligation to help this man.

Four years have gone by, and Hester's position in the community has changed: She has been given credit for bearing her shame with courage, and her life has been one of purity since Pearl's birth. While Dimmesdale's sermons have become more humane and praised because of his suffering, Hester's position has risen because of her charity. Her scarlet A now stands for "Able." But this has come with a price: no friends, no passion, no love or affection.

Through adversity, Hester has forged a new place for herself on the edge of Puritan society. In contrast, Dimmesdale's mental balance has suffered greatly. Now she must help the man who seems to be on "the verge of lunacy." In fact, she feels it has been an error on her part not to step forward before. So she resolves to speak with her husband.

### **Analysis**

It is important to note the chapter title: "Another View of Hester." This chapter is a discussion of Hester's personality, character, and intellect as well as a summary and an update of her past four years (Pearl is now seven). This "other view" refers to both the changing perception of the Puritan community toward Hester and the narrator's telling description of her.

Hester's position in the eyes of the Puritan community has changed considerably due to her grace and her charity. She has borne her shame and sorrow with great dignity. The town describes her now as one "who is so kind to the poor, helpful to the sick, so comfortable to the afflicted!" Now the scarlet letter has magical qualities, and myths are growing around its power. But this

new definition of Hester Prynne is not without a price. Her luxuriant beauty, and the warmth, charm, and passion that she once showed have been replaced by coldness, severity, and drabness. There is no affection, love, or passion in her life. Her humanity has been stripped from her by the severity of her punishment, and her charity and benevolence seem mechanical. No one crosses the threshold of her cottage in friendship. To add to this burden, her daughter seems to have been "born amiss."

Another view of Hester identified in the chapter title is that of the narrator, not the Puritan community. Her life, having "changed from passion and feeling to thought . . . she assumed a freedom of speculation . . . which [the Puritans], had they known it, would have held to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatized by the scarlet letter." The narrator speculates that, had it not been for her responsibilities to little Pearl, Hester "might have come down to us in history, hand in hand with Anne Hutchinson, as the foundress of a religious sect" and quite probably would have been executed for "attempting to undermine the foundations of the Puritan establishment." Tellingly, the narrator remarks, "The scarlet letter had not done its office."

This chapter also describes Hester's motive in speaking with Chillingworth, a conversation that will take place in the next chapter. Having seen the terrible toll Chillingworth is taking on Dimmesdale, she decides that she is partly to blame. Now she must do something to redeem her error in not identifying him to her former lover.

## **Chapter 14 : Hester and the Physician**

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### **Summary**

While walking on the peninsula with Pearl, Hester sees Chillingworth and sends Pearl down to play by the seashore while she speaks with her husband. She is surprised at the changes in Chillingworth just as she was shocked by Dimmesdale's spiritual ailment and aging. Realizing Chillingworth is in the grip of the devil, she feels responsible for "another ruin." According to Hester, her promise has caused Chillingworth to do evil to the minister, but Chillingworth denies his role at first. Then he admits that, although he used to be kind, gentle, and affectionate, he now allows evil to use him. The physician believes it his fate to become a fiend. He releases Hester from her promise of silence.

### **Analysis**

During these long seven years, Chillingworth has become obsessed with revenge, and this deadly sin has changed him considerably. He pities Hester because he feels she is not really sinful, and any breach with God's law has been paid many times over by her wearing of the scarlet letter. He further feels that



if she had "met earlier with a better love than mine, this evil had not been." On the other hand, he also says it is his fate to change from a "kind, true, just" man to a fiend who does the devil's work.

By placing these two characters together in this chapter without Pearl, Hawthorne shows what the years have done to Chillingworth. We see a side of the old scholar that makes us pity him despite his treatment of Dimmesdale, and we feel that of them all, Hester has paid her dues and deserves our respect.

## **Chapter 15 : Hester and Pearl**

### **Summary**

As Chillingworth leaves, Hester recognizes how evil he has become and realizes she hates him. Meanwhile, Pearl has entertained herself quite well: she played with her image in a pool, made boats of birch bark, and threw pebbles at beach-birds. Finally, she uses seaweed to make a scarf and then decorates her bosom with a green letter A.

Pearl wants to know what the scarlet letter means. Hester is tempted to tell her because she has no one else in whom she can confide. But despite repeated questions by Pearl, Hester says she wears the letter for "the sake of the gold thread" - the first time she had "been false to the symbol on her bosom." Pearl is not satisfied and continues to question Hester until Hester threatens to shut Pearl in a dark closet.

### **Analysis**

Despite her pity for Chillingworth in Chapter 14, Hester reveals her deep hatred for him in this chapter. She realizes that he set off a chain of events beginning with an unnatural, loveless marriage. "Be it sin or no, I hate the man!" is her final word on the subject. We hear for the first time her thoughts about her marriage to Chillingworth. He spent long hours among his books, emerging to "bask himself in [her] . . . smile." While she used to think of this domestic scene as happy long ago, she now sees how dismal it was and counts it among "her ugliest remembrances."

By now the careful reader should be examining the differences in the two relationships that are presented in the novel. First, in the Hester-Chillingworth relationship is a marriage accepted and legal in every way but without love and passion. In the Hester-Dimmesdale relationship is love and passion without marriage. The plot and themes of this novel are set in the Puritan society at the confluence of these two relationships.

Another variation on the scarlet letter occurs in Hester's conversation with Pearl. The pathetic loneliness of Hester's position is obvious as she wonders if she should confide in her daughter. Except for the two men in her life, she has no one to whom she can unburden her mind. Hester is strongly tempted to talk with Pearl but then decides to keep the story to herself.

**Summary**

For several days Hester tries unsuccessfully to intercept Dimmesdale on one of his frequent walks along the shore or through the woods. When she hears that he will be returning from a trip, she goes with Pearl into the forest, hoping to meet the minister on his return home. As she and Pearl walk along the narrow path through the dense woods, flickering gleams of sunshine break through the heavy gray clouds above them. Pearl suggests the sunshine is running away from Hester because of the A on her bosom. In contrast, Pearl, being a child without any such letter, runs and “catches” a patch of light; then, as Hester approaches, the sunshine disappears.

Pearl asks Hester to tell her about the Black Man. She has heard stories about him and questions Hester about her dealings with him and whether the scarlet letter is his mark. Under Pearl’s questioning, Hester confesses, “Once in my life I met the Black Man! . . . This scarlet letter is his mark!”

Having reached the depths of the forest, Hester and Pearl sit on a heap of moss beside a brook. Just then footsteps are heard on the path, and Hester sends Pearl away, but not before the girl asks whether it is the Black Man approaching and whether Dimmesdale holds his hand over his heart to cover the Black Man’s sign. Before Hester can answer, Dimmesdale comes upon them. The minister looks haggard and feeble and moves listlessly as though he has no purpose or desire to live. He holds his hand over his heart.

**Analysis**

This chapter and the four chapters that follow contain the longest section of continuous dramatic action in the book. Although the novel covers seven years, fully one-fifth of its total words are concentrated here, during the action of this single, crucial day. This particular chapter serves primarily to set the stage for the confession to follow. It is also rich in atmosphere and symbolism. The chilly gloom of the forest almost perfectly reflects Hester’s state of mind and the mood of the following scene. Nearly every element mentioned in the chapter carries some symbolic significance.

The narrow footpath through the dense forest is suggestive of the “moral wilderness” Hester has been forced to follow for the past seven years. The story of the Black Man and his mark is described as a “common superstition,” yet for Hester, the Black Man and his mark have a special, personal meaning. Here Hawthorne connects the letter with the Black Man and eventually with Dimmesdale’s burden, and he does so mainly through their conversations.

Hawthorne spends part of this chapter connecting Pearl with nature and the wilderness around them. The brook is suggestive of Pearl, “inasmuch as the

current of her life gushed from a well-spring as mysterious, and had flowed through scenes shadowed as heavily with gloom." Pearl, being a product of passion, seems to speak to nature and understand its wildness and beauty. She sees how the sunshine loves her yet disappears for Hester. Added to this insight is the idea that Hester hopes Pearl will never have to wear a scarlet letter, or symbol of a "sinful" act. Pearl has not yet had a grief that will fill her with compassion and sympathy, humanizing her as Hester has been humanized.

In coming conversations between Hester and the minister, the symbols of nature, natural law, and humanity will be placed next to the more artificial laws of Puritan society as Hawthorne develops the conflict between them.

## **Chapter 17 : The Pastor and His Parishioner**

### **Summary**

As Dimmesdale walks in the wilderness, returning from a visit with Apostle Eliot, he hears Hester's voice and is surprised by her presence. At first, he cannot tell whether she is a human or a ghost. In fact, they are both ghosts of their former selves, and their chill hands and hesitant words reveal the strangeness of this meeting.

Both Hester and Dimmesdale talk with each other about the past seven years, and Dimmesdale confesses his misery and unhappiness. While Hester consoles him and mentions people's reverence for him, the minister feels his guilt and hypocrisy even more. He compares his silence with her public confession and realizes how his hidden guilt is tormenting him.

Hester, realizing how deeply her silence has permitted Dimmesdale to be tortured by her husband, seizes the moment to reveal Chillingworth's secret. This torture has led to insanity and "that eternal alienation from the Good and True, of which madness is perhaps the earthly type." Hester also realizes that she still loves Dimmesdale, and she begs his forgiveness for her silence.

The minister reacts to this revelation with anger at first, blaming her for his torture and realizing why he intuitively recoiled from Chillingworth on their first encounter. Hester, who has silently borne the disdain and scorn of the community and who has lived these seven years without human sympathy, cannot bear Dimmesdale's condemnation, and she falls beside him and cries, "Thou shalt forgive me! Let God punish! Thou shalt forgive!" She hugs him with great tenderness and feels such a compassion for his sorrow that her seven years of punishment seem to fall away.

Dimmesdale, for his part, forgives her and asks God to forgive them both. He believes that Chillingworth is the worst sinner of them all because he "violated, in cold blood, the sanctity of the human heart," unlike he and she, who "never did so." They are reluctant to leave this place in the forest because

here they find a peace and harmony that they cannot feel in the Puritan community. Dimmesdale fears Chillingworth's course now that he, no doubt, knows "her purpose to reveal his true character," and he asks Hester to give him courage.

Hester's plan is for Dimmesdale to go deeper into the wilderness and live in natural freedom away from the eyes of Puritan society or to return to Europe, where he will be free of "these iron men and their opinions." But Dimmesdale feels he has not the strength to do either. While he falters, Hester encourages him, claiming that he can lead a powerful life for good and still fulfill his mission on earth. When the minister says he cannot do this alone, she tells him she will go with him.

### **Analysis**

This chapter is pivotal in many respects: It advances the plot and characters by revealing Hester and Dimmesdale's feelings of the past seven years and the reawakening of their dormant love. Also in this chapter, Hawthorne reveals his philosophy on punishment and forgiveness: that deliberate, calculated acts of malice are far worse than sins of passion. In this way, Chillingworth is the worst of the three sinners. Finally, the author provides hope that his characters will find an escape, a way out of their earthly torment. He explores the conflict between natural law and Puritan law in their escape plans.

During the past seven years Dimmesdale has been continually tormented by the dichotomy between what he is and what people believe him to be. His parishioners are "hungry for the truth" and listen to his words as if "a tongue of Pentecost were speaking!" But as often as he has confessed his guilt to God, he has not told it to any other human being. He bears his shame alone. Hawthorne contrasts this with Hester's visible sign of her guilt, confession, and hope for redemption. While Hester tries to console the minister and persuade him that he has repented and left his sin behind, Dimmesdale knows that he can go no place without carrying his hidden guilt along.

Hester realizes that she still loves Dimmesdale, and she courageously tells him this, even as she reveals her silence concerning Chillingworth. Hawthorne contrasts their love - "which had a consecration of its own" - and Chillingworth's revenge and asks the reader which sin is worse. Who has violated God's law with sure and certain knowledge? And whose place is it to provide redemption and forgiveness? While Hester believes they can outrun "these iron men" with their rules, guilt, and punishment, Dimmesdale is not so sure. Two forms of moral law are at work here - the laws of God and nature and the laws interpreted and written by "these iron men." In the long run, can escaping the rules of man enable them also to do God's will?



Dimmesdale is reluctant to leave because he believes God has given him a post which he must not desert. This wilderness of God's world is in need of his gifts. Hester assures him that he can do God's will in another place - Europe - and it is only the Puritan laws that hold him in bondage. He can "Preach! Write! Act!" and live a true life in Europe instead of dying, as he seems to be doing here in the wilderness, with fear and shame by his side.

Hawthorne shows the relative strengths of his characters in this argument. Hester reaches within herself and uses the strength and inner courage she has relied on over her seven long and lonely years. In fact, for Hester, "the whole seven years of outlaw and ignominy had been little other than a preparation for this very hour." Deep inside, she knows they can leave the Puritan colony and still have a life of spiritual richness. They have paid for their sins and can still respect and uphold God's laws. Dimmesdale, on the other hand, lacks this perspective and Hester's courage, and several times he calls on her for strength.

## **Chapter 18 : A Flood of Sunshine**

### **Summary**

The minister takes courage from Hester's strength and resolves to leave the Puritan colony, but not alone. He reasons that if he is doomed irrevocably, why not be allowed the solace of a "condemned culprit before his execution?" Hester agrees with him and casts off the scarlet letter. She takes off her cap and lets down her full, rich, luxuriant hair. Nature reflects on her passionate action by allowing sunshine to burst forth.

Now Hester wants Dimmesdale to know Pearl. He is reluctant at first, but she assures him Pearl will love him. While the child slowly comes toward them, all of nature seems to tag along as her playmate and kindred spirit.

### **Analysis**

This chapter is a variation on the preceding one and develops more fully Hawthorne's contrast between God's laws as interpreted through nature and God's laws as interpreted by man. Dimmesdale is sorely tempted by the idea of fleeing. He is the chief proponent of the religious tenets in this Puritan community (see "The Puritan Setting of The Scarlet Letter" in the Critical Essays). Because the Puritans believe that God allows redemption only for the elect and that salvation is attained solely through faith and the gift of divine grace, Dimmesdale rationalizes that he is a doomed soul and is momentarily attracted to "the solace allowed to the condemned culprit before his execution." He feels he is already a condemned.

By removing the symbols of Puritan law (the scarlet letter) and Puritan society (the formal cap that confined her hair), Hester is transformed from the



dull, drab, gray “fallen woman” into the passionate, voluptuous human who follows natural law and expresses her love for Dimmesdale. Nature shows its support for her actions as the sunshine follows her. Dimmesdale relies on her to redeem him and believes she can provide the mercy and forgiveness he has not felt at the hands of God. Taking off the scarlet letter, Hester seems to release them both from an earthly prison. But there is one last hurdle to cross: the meeting between Pearl and Dimmesdale.

In this chapter, Hawthorne’s descriptions of Pearl reinforce her mysterious and ethereal nature. She is so closely linked with nature that here, in the forest, the sunlight plays with her, and forest creatures (a partridge, a squirrel, a fox, and a wolf) approach her and recognize “a kindred wildness in the human child.” Even the flowers respond to her and, as she passes, seem to say, “Adorn thyself with me, thou beautiful child, adorn thyself with me!” Pearl is “gentler here (in the forest) than in the grassy margined streets of the settlement, or in her mother’s cottage,” reinforcing that she is in accord with the natural world and not the man-made world. If Hester and Dimmesdale are to pass the test of natural law, they must meet with Pearl’s approval. That Pearl advances “slowly; for she saw the clergyman” does not bode well for the reunited lovers.

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## Chapter 19 : The Child at the Brook-Side

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### Summary

Hester decides the time has come for Dimmesdale to meet Pearl. Hester and Dimmesdale are joined spiritually and genetically to this child, and “in her was visible the tie that united them.” While Dimmesdale confesses that he has always been afraid someone would recognize his features in Pearl, Hester simply speaks of Pearl’s beauty and sees her as a “living hieroglyphic.” Dimmesdale remembers Pearl being kind to him, yet he also feels ill at ease around children and is not very confident about this meeting. Hester, however, assures him that Pearl will love him and that he should be careful not to overwhelm her with emotion.

Pearl moves very slowly toward them, trying to discern her parents’ relationship. Dimmesdale senses her hesitation and puts his hand once again over his heart. Seeing the scarlet letter on the ground and her mother’s hair sensuously falling about her shoulders, Pearl points her finger, stamps her foot, shrieks, and “bursts into a fit of passion.”

Hester’s and Dimmesdale’s reactions to Pearl’s behavior vary. Hester realizes that Pearl recognizes the change in her (the letter is gone from her bosom and her hair is no longer hidden under a cap), and she hurries to fasten the hated badge to her dress and to draw her cap over her hair. She excuses

Pearl's actions by saying children cannot abide change easily. Dimmesdale, on the other hand, begs Hester to do whatever will stop this fit and pacify Pearl. As soon as Hester changes her appearance, Pearl willingly comes to her and mockingly kisses the scarlet letter.

Pearl desires the minister to acknowledge her in public. While Hester assures her that this admission will happen in the future, Dimmesdale kisses Pearl's forehead in an attempt to mollify her. Pearl immediately goes to the brook and washes off the kiss. There she remains apart from the adults, and the brook babbles cheerlessly on.

### **Analysis**

Pearl is the one who moves the action in this chapter, and her response to Dimmesdale and Hester together does not foreshadow a happy ending. In fact, more than ever, Pearl is a symbol of the passionate act of her parents. She is a constant reminder of Hester's sin and, if Hester tries momentarily to forget the past, Pearl certainly disapproves. Pearl, throughout the novel, has shown herself to be unamenable to human rules and laws and seems to lack human sympathy.

Pearl interpreted on one level, acts like a child who has suddenly realized that her world may be changing. On another level, Pearl is one with nature in the wilderness. Her image is reflected perfectly in the brook, which separates her from Hester and the minister, and as she bursts into a fit of passion at the absence of Hester's scarlet letter, "... it seemed as if a hidden multitude were lending her their sympathy and encouragement."

## **Chapter 20 : The Minister in a Maze**

### **Summary**

Dimmesdale leaves the forest first, almost believing what has transpired has been a dream. When he looks back, he sees Hester weighed down with sadness and Pearl dancing because he is gone. Turning over their plan in his mind, he believes that going to Europe is the better choice. He is not healthy enough to endure a life in the forest converting natives, and Europe offers more civilization and refinement. Furthermore, a vessel currently in the harbor is soon sailing for England, and Hester will discreetly secure their passage for a departure in four days. The timing of the voyage enables him to give the Election Sermon, an opportunity he can use to terminate his career "honorably."

Thus decided, Dimmesdale is a new man. He walks with great energy and sees everything differently. In fact, he sees things so differently that he almost becomes afraid for himself. Three times, he meets people of his congregation,

and each time he is tempted to do something terrible. The venerable and upright deacon of his church is narrowly saved from Dimmesdale uttering blasphemy.

The eldest dame of the congregation - she who worshiped the minister - is almost treated to a sacrilegious argument against the soul's immortality. And, finally, a sweet, young virgin narrowly escapes a wicked look from her beloved minister. Finally, he barely refrains from teaching bad words to a group of children and trading curses with a sailor.

Mistress Hibbins invites Dimmesdale to the forest and tells him she admires the way he covers up his true feelings during the day. But she knows she will see him in the forest with the Black Man when midnight comes. Dimmesdale hurries home and, because he is agitated, Chillingworth offers to give him some medicine to calm him down. Dimmesdale lies to Chillingworth, telling him that though he knows his medicine is dispensed by a loving hand, he does not need it. Then he goes to his study and furiously writes his Election Sermon.

### **Analysis**

This entire chapter - note the title - focuses on the spiritual battle warring within Dimmesdale. He has been transformed from the weak and dying man who went into the forest. Hawthorne here examines the nature of the fight and interjects his own comments at various points.

When Dimmesdale says that he will leave after his Election Day sermon so that he will be seen as leaving "no public duty unperformed," Hawthorne writes, "No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself, and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be true." The formerly weak, pitiful Dimmesdale leaves the forest with a new sense of purpose and energy. His thinking has been transformed by his will and that of Hester.

As if possessed, Dimmesdale returns to the town, a man on fire. He is tempted several times by the irrational, wild, blasphemous, and - what Dimmesdale calls "involuntary" - desire to do wicked things to members of his congregation and perfect strangers. Even Mistress Hibbins recognizes him as a kindred spirit.

Dimmesdale is the "wretched minister! . . . Tempted by a dream of happiness, he had yielded himself, with deliberate choice, as he had never done before, to what he knew was deadly sin." This choice is taking him down the road to hell and reviving a multitude of sinful impulses from somewhere. Even his affair with Hester seven years before had not been "a deliberate choice" and hence, although a sin, not a deadly one.

Dimmesdale works with great passion on his Election Sermon, putting this new energy to good use. When Chillingworth says that his congregation may find their ill pastor gone the next year, Dimmesdale agrees. In fact he answers Chillingworth, "Yea, to another world" with "pious resignation." Hawthorne's delicious sense of irony is evident when the reader senses that Chillingworth and Dimmesdale are not talking about the same destinations. Why is Dimmesdale so able to lie to his tormenter? Mistress Hibbins would say it is because his soul has been sold. Whatever the reason, it is definitely providing inspiration for the minister's speech.

## **Chapter 21 : The New England Holiday**

### **Summary**

Hester and Pearl go to the marketplace to watch the procession and celebration as elected officials assume their offices. Hester thinks about leaving Boston with Dimmesdale and having a life as a woman once again. While she meditates on her future, Pearl, agitated by the crowd and celebration, dances as she waits for the procession. She alone senses Hester's excitement; to other observers, Hester appears to watch the procession passively.

Pearl continues to ask Hester precocious questions. She wants to know about the procession and asks whether the minister will acknowledge them as he did on the midnight scaffold. Hester quiets her and tells her she must not call out to Dimmesdale.

The captain of the Bristol-bound ship sees Hester and tells her that they will have company on their trip to Europe : Roger Chillingworth.

### **Analysis**

Chapter 21 is the first of several chapters that constitute the third scaffold scene and that lead to the climax of the novel. In these chapters, Hawthorne again brings together his main characters and, in these few pages, illustrates the major conflicts in the light of day and in a very public place.

One of the first issues addressed is the difference in public and private behavior. Hawthorne uses pointed satire when he comments that, on this most festive day, the people "compressed whatever mirth and public joy they deemed allowable to human infirmity; thereby so far dispelling the customary cloud, that, for the space of a single holiday, they appeared scarcely more grave than most other communities at a period of general affliction." Even Hester serves as a solitary example of the difference between the gloom of Puritan outward life and the excitement she feels within. She must show little joy and certainly no indication that she plans to leave the colony with Pearl and Dimmesdale. At the same time, she is exulting in the fact that soon she will no longer have to



wear the scarlet letter, that it will be flung to the bottom of the ocean. For a few hours more, however, she must endure her badge of shame until they are safely away.

Pearl's comments are also important in this chapter because they point to the doom facing Dimmesdale unless he publicly repents. She prophetically describes the minister as a "strange, sad man . . . with his hand always over his heart!" She does not understand why the minister cannot acknowledge her or her mother "here, in the sunny day." The reader sees Hawthorne's message: No matter how far away the three may sail or how long they may live, Dimmesdale can never be at peace with Hester or his tortured conscience if he does not confess his part in their sin.

This idea is further demonstrated when Hester discovers that Chillingworth also plans to leave on the ship to Bristol. Perhaps Dimmesdale will be able to outrun his conscience in this life or his Creator's knowledge in the next. It appears, however, that Chillingworth does not plan to allow him escape from punishment wherever he goes on the face of the earth.

## **Chapter 22 : The Procession**

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### **Summary**

While Hester ponders Chillingworth's smile, the Election Day procession begins. First music adds a "higher and more heroic air." Then comes a company of gentlemen soldiers, brilliantly garbed. Next are the political dignitaries, stable, dignified, and drawing a reverent reaction from the crowd. Finally comes the minister, Dimmesdale, whose intellectual prowess is mentioned by Hawthorne. He has changed, showing great energy and an air of purpose in his walk and demeanor. His strength is spiritual, and he has an abstracted air as though he hears things not of this earth.

The focus now goes to Hester and her reaction to Dimmesdale. How far away he seems and how remote from the man she met only three days ago in the forest! She realizes what a great gulf there is between them, and she can scarcely forgive him for his remoteness. Even Pearl does not recognize him because he has changed so completely.

Meanwhile, Mistress Hibbins appears and speaks with Hester and Pearl. As Pearl questions Mistress Hibbins about what the minister hides, the witch tells Hester that she knows the minister also has a hidden sin comparable to Hester's scarlet token. When pressed about how she knows this, Mistress Hibbins explains that intuitively recognizing a fellow sinner is not difficult. She leaves, having said that soon the world will know of Dimmesdale's sin.

Now Hester hears the voice of Dimmesdale giving his sermon; while she cannot hear the words, she does hear sympathy, emotion, and compassion



mixed with a "low expression of anguish." He may not be telling the world of his sin, but Hester hears the sadness and despair in his tone because she is so in sympathy with his heart.

Then Pearl scampers off through the crowd in her bright red dress and sees the shipmaster, who gives her a message for her mother: Chillingworth has secured passage for himself and Dimmesdale on the ship. When Hester hears this, she glances around the crowd and sees the same faces that were at the first scaffold scene. The chapter ends with the lines "The sainted minister in the church! The woman of the scarlet letter in the marketplace!" Who would believe "that the same scorching stigma was on them both?"

### **Analysis**

In this chapter, Hawthorne interrupts the plot to comment on the state of politicians in his time. He describes the early politicians of the colony as lacking mental brilliance but full of "ponderous sobriety." They had great fortitude and inner strength, and, in an emergency, they made wise decisions and stood up to any attack on the colony. Hawthorne even feels they would have peers in the Old World who would see in them the same authority as English statesmen. The people revere them in the Puritan colony, but by Hawthorne's time, that esteem had diminished. He writes that the people of the 1600s had a "quality of reverence; which, in their descendants, if it survive at all, exists in smaller proportion, and with a vastly diminished force, in the selection and estimate of public men."

After this pleasant sojourn into seventeenth century politics, Hawthorne turns the focus on Hester. When Hawthorne describes Hester's reaction to Dimmesdale's remoteness, he virtually eliminates the possibility that they have a future together. In her mind, Hester compares Dimmesdale as he appears at the celebration ("He seemed so remote from her own sphere, and utterly beyond her reach") with how he was just three days earlier in the forest ("how deeply had they known each other then!"). She begins to think she must have dreamed that meeting in the forest because now Dimmesdale seems wholly unsympathetic and removed to his Puritan world. While she can still feel his emotions, she also can hardly forgive him for withdrawing from her and their plans to share their lives.

Hawthorne uses Mistress Hibbins to foreshadow the ending and emphasize the intuitive understanding of human hearts. The old witch reveals that the minister's sin will soon be public knowledge and, when pressed by Hester to explain herself, says that the forest leaves its mark on everyone; even without tell-tale signs, such as leaves or twigs in a person's hair, the evidence is in his demeanor. When Pearl asks about sinful secrets, the witch warns the child that she will see the work of the devil "one time or another."

In this passage, Hawthorne not only describes his ideas about sin, temptation, and human frailty, but he also explains the intuitive nature of human knowledge. Dimmesdale may : have removed himself from Hester's emotional sphere on this day, but she has certainly not lost her intuitive connection with him. In his voice, she hears and recognizes the voices of his heart and also the "low expression of anguish." She may not be able to hear his words distinctly, but she can feel his sorrow-laden and guilty heart. In the tone of voice is a plea for forgiveness.

Somehow the two sinners must come together. To move toward the climax, Hawthorne has cut off escape with Chillingworth's actions, and he ends the chapter by describing the saint and the sinner side by side. Although the world remains unaware, the principal characters are moving closer and closer to this revelation.

## **Chapter 23 : The Revelation of the Scarlet Letter**

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### **Summary**

At the end of Dimmesdale's Election Day sermon, the crowd emerges from the church, inspired by powerful words they have just heard from a man whom they feel is soon to die. This moment is the most brilliant and triumphant in Dimmesdale's public life. As the procession of dignitaries marches to a banquet at the town hall, the feelings of the crowd are expressed in a spontaneous shout of tribute to Dimmesdale. "Never, on New England soil, has stood the man so honored by his mortal brethren, as the preacher!" But the shout dies to a murmur as the people see Dimmesdale totter feebly and nervously in the procession. His face has taken on a deathly pallor, and he can scarcely walk. Several people attempt to help him, but the minister repels them until he comes to the scaffold where Hester stands holding Pearl by the hand. There Dimmesdale pauses.

As the minister turns to the scaffold, he calls Hester and Pearl to his side. Suddenly, Chillingworth appears and attempts to stop Dimmesdale, but the minister scorns the old physician and cries out to Hester to help him get up to the scaffold. The crowd watches in astonishment as the minister, leaning on Hester and holding Pearl's hand, ascends the scaffold steps. Chillingworth's face darkens as he realizes that nowhere else but on the scaffold can Dimmesdale escape him.

The minister tells Hester that he is dying and must acknowledge his shame. Then he turns to the crowd and cries out his guilt. He steps in front of Hester and Pearl and declares that on his breast he bears the sign of his sin. He tears the ministerial band from his breast and, for a moment, stands flushed with triumph before the horrified crowd. Then he sinks down upon the scaffold.

Hester lifts Dimmesdale's head and cradles it against her bosom. Chillingworth, meanwhile, kneels down and, in a tone of defeat, repeats, over and over, "Thou hast escaped me!" The minister asks God's forgiveness for Chillingworth's sin; then he turns to Pearl and asks for a kiss. Pearl kisses him and weeps.

Dimmesdale, obviously dying now, tells Hester farewell. She asks whether they will spend eternity together. In answer, he recalls their sin and says he fears that eternal happiness is not a state for which they can hope. The minister leaves the matter to God, whose mercy he has seen in the afflictions leading to his public confession. His dying words are "Praised be his name! His will be done! Farewell!"

### **Analysis**

Hawthorne brings all the principal characters together at a third scaffold scene in this chapter, which begins with the triumph of Dimmesdale's sermon and ends with his death.

Dimmesdale's sermon is a personal triumph. In fact, Hawthorne ironically compares him to an angel who had "shaken his bright wings over the people" and "shed down a shower of golden truths upon them." This final irony between his public and private lives is revealed when he confesses his sin on the scaffold to all of the people who think of him as a saint. He gives up everything : his child, his love, his life, and his honor. The relationship to God that he has been preaching about cannot be based on a lie. God sees everything, and Dimmesdale, no matter how hard he has tried, cannot outrun the truth that his conscience and his mind believe. Sailing to Europe will not bring him beyond the reach of God's knowledge.

Not only does Dimmesdale confess, but he must do so alone. Although Hester helps him to the scaffold where she was punished seven years before, she cannot help him make his peace with God. The Church, in the form of Mr. Wilson, and the State, symbolized by Governor Bellingham, both try to hold Dimmesdale up as he approaches the scaffold, but he repels them and goes on alone. He does turn to Hester prior to his death and ask for her strength, guided by God. Having escaped the clutches of Chillingworth, he turns to Hester with "an expression of doubt and anxiety in his eyes."

Before actually confessing, he asks her, "Is this not better than what we dreamed of in the forest?" He is asking Hester to confirm the righteousness of this act and explains to her : "For thee and Pearl, be it as God shall order . . . Let me now do the will which He hath made plain before my sight." Although Dimmesdale may still doubt his choice and requires Hester's strength, in the end, he leaves his fate to God, trusting that His mercy will be more certain in death than Chillingworth's relentless torment is in life.

Given that he is dying, Dimmesdale asks Hester whether confession is better than fleeing. She has lived for seven long years with the torment of her neighbors and the shame of her scarlet letter. She hurriedly answers him that perhaps the three of them dying together would be preferable, but if Dimmesdale dies alone what will she have? She will have no love, no life other than the loneliness she has already has, and a daughter who will have no father.

Pearl is given the most wonderful gift : a life that is filled with love and happiness. When her father finally publicly acknowledges her, she kisses him and weeps an actual tear. As Hawthorne says, "the spell is broken." There is hope that Pearl will grow up, be able to interact with other human beings, find love, and live a long and happy life.

Chillingworth loses his victory in two ways. First, he no longer has Dimmesdale to torment, and second, he receives Dimmesdale's blessing. Even as he is dying, the minister manages to retain his reverence and his kindness by asking God's forgiveness for Chillingworth. As Hester noted in her husband's changed appearance earlier, revenge is never a positive motive and generally consumes its possessor.

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## Chapter 24 : Conclusion

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### Summary

Several versions circulate of what actually transpired in the marketplace. Most people say they saw a scarlet A imprinted on Dimmesdale's chest, but there is conjecture as to its origin. Some think the emblem is a hideous torture the minister inflicted on himself, others think it is the result of Chillingworth's drugs, and still others believe it was remorse gnawing its way out of Dimmesdale's conscience. Still other observers claim that the minister's death serves as a parable showing that even the most saintly of us are sinners. Hawthorne puts this latter version down to the loyalty of friends and gives it little credence. He does state that a moral lesson is to be found in the original manuscript from the Custom House. That precept is "Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!"

In considering which characters follow this caveat, Hawthorne discusses their fates. Chillingworth, consumed by his revenge, shrivels up and vanishes. He leaves Pearl great wealth in his will, and she and her mother disappear, presumably to Europe. After their departure, the legend of the scarlet letter grows. Finally, one day Hester returns alone and inhabits once again the little cottage. She wears gray and reapplies the scarlet A to her bosom.



No one knows Pearl's fate, but people assume that she married well and had a family because letters with the seals of heraldry arrive for Hester and articles of comfort and luxury are found in her cottage. Hester is also seen embroidering baby garments; instead of Puritan colors, she uses most un-Puritan-like lavish and rich materials.

Finally, Hester becomes a symbol of comfort and compassion, and upon her death, she is buried in the cemetery near the prison door where she first was incarcerated. While alive, she gives hope and comfort to those who feel sorrow and pain, and, accordingly, the scarlet letter becomes a symbol of help. She becomes a prophet of a better time where human happiness will be easier to obtain than in the rigid rules of Puritan society. When she dies, she is buried next to Dimmesdale. Their graves are slightly apart but with a single gravestone bearing the inscription: "On a field, sable, the letter A, gules."

### **Analysis**

This concluding chapter serves to answer whatever questions the reader may have after the final scaffold scene. As is his fashion, Hawthorne lends his customary ambiguity and vagueness to many of the questions by citing various points of view or options related to incidences without anointing any one of them as true. One such incident involves what people actually saw when Dimmesdale exposed his bosom on the scaffold. He presents several possible versions of the spectators at the scaffold that day including that some saw no letter on Dimmesdale's chest. He attributes this last version to the loyalty of friends to Dimmesdale.

Hawthorne explains that the moral of the story, gleaned from an old manuscript of testimony of people who had known Hester, is based on "the poor minister's miserable experience, and he states a kind of moral for us : "Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait by which the worst may be inferred." This often quoted moral about being true to oneself leaves the reader thinking about the characters in the story and which ones were true and what prices they paid.

Chillingworth shrivels up and vanishes because his revenge has consumed him and made him inhuman. Without his victim, he has no reason to live. But Hawthorne also adds mercy to Chillingworth's death. He explains in a lengthy paragraph that love and hate have a lot in common, and perhaps in the next life, both the spurned husband and the minister will rest in peace.

Pearl's fate is most interesting. The reader is never given a confirmed version of her life but is left to believe she lived a long and happy one, married and the mother of children. Hawthorne ironically notes that her rise in wealth certainly elevated her and Hester in the eyes of the colony that once spurned them. And he further adds that she could have married a "Puritan of the most



devout nature.” Having seen her father, the devout Puritan, one would certainly not wish that fate on Pearl. Hawthorne hints that her life elsewhere is much happier than it would have been had she married in the New World. The tear she shed at Dimmesdale’s death was truly evidence that she would grow up to be humane. And her love and generosity toward Hester are obvious.

Finally, Hester’s fate ends the book. One might ask why she returns to Boston, the scene of “her sin .... her sorrow ... her penitence.” Hawthorne leaves the reader, once again, to decide. Perhaps she feels drawn to the place. Why does she resume wearing the scarlet A? Is it a sign that she accepts the rigid standards of Puritan society, or is it a sign that she stayed true to herself by daring to live beyond the petty rules of Puritan society? Hawthorne, perhaps, leans toward the latter idea when he views her as a seer of a future age where “a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness.”

The graceful and dignified woman Hester has become is a survivor through suffering. Now that she has suffered, she can give what Dimmesdale could not: hope to those who are hopeless and help to those who have sorrow and are in trouble. Because her heart has felt these emotions, she is able to comfort others.

Even in death Dimmesdale and Hester are not allowed to mingle their dust. Perhaps Dimmesdale was right in questioning whether they would have a life together beyond this one. While their graves are slightly apart, the last irony is that they share a common tombstone. They could not be together in life, but in death they share a scarlet letter.

## ANSWERS

### ■ Multiple Choice Questions

1. In what century is the story of Hester Prynne set?  
(a) The sixteenth century                      (b) The seventeenth century  
(c) The eighteenth century                    (d) The nineteenth century
2. What is the occupation of the narrator of this story?  
(a) Attorney                                      (b) Minister  
(c) Land surveyor                                (d) Customs officer
3. Where do Hester and Chillingworth live before coming to America?  
(a) Amsterdam                                  (b) Paris  
(c) Edinburgh                                    (d) Jamaica
4. With whom has Chillingworth been living before he appears in Boston?  
(a) Another band of Puritans                  (b) Native Americans  
(c) Spanish settlers in Florida                (d) Canadian fur trappers

5. What is situated immediately outside the door of the prison in which Hester is kept?
  - (a) A rosebush
  - (b) A pine tree
  - (c) A gallows
  - (d) A graveyard
6. What item in the governor's mansion shows Hester a distorted reflection of herself?
  - (a) An antique mirror
  - (b) A suit of armor
  - (c) A stained-glass window
  - (d) The governor's eyeglasses
7. Which of the following is a method Dimmesdale uses to punish himself for his sins?
  - (a) Scourging or whipping
  - (b) Fasting
  - (c) Vigils (extended periods of wakefulness and/or prayer)
  - (d) All of the above
8. In what city do Hester and Pearl live?
  - (a) Salem
  - (b) Providence
  - (c) Boston
  - (d) Hartford
9. Who is Mistress Hibbins?
  - (a) The governor's sister
  - (b) Hester's mother
  - (c) Dimmesdale's aunt
  - (d) Chillingworth's second wife
10. How does Mistress Hibbins eventually die?
  - (a) She is strangled by Chillingworth.
  - (b) She wastes away in a diphtheria epidemic.
  - (c) She is executed publicly as a witch.
  - (d) Pearl puts a hex on her.
11. How does Hester support herself financially?
  - (a) As a prostitute
  - (b) As a seamstress
  - (c) As a nurse
  - (d) As a farmhand
12. Next to whom is Hester buried?
  - (a) Dimmesdale
  - (b) Chillingworth
  - (c) Pearl
  - (d) No one; her body is burned.
13. What natural phenomenon comes to symbolize both Dimmesdale's "sin" and Governor Winthrop's "virtue"?
  - (a) A lightning bolt
  - (b) A meteor
  - (c) A forest fire
  - (d) A flood
14. Why does Pearl not recognize her mother when she sees her with Dimmesdale in the forest?

- (a) Hester has removed *The Scarlet Letter*.
  - (b) Hester has removed her cap to expose her long hair.
  - (c) Hester is not wearing her usual plain gray dress.
  - (d) Mistress Hibbins has cast a spell on Hester, changing her appearance.
15. How does Pearl acknowledge Dimmesdale as her father at his death?
- (a) By calling him "father"                      (b) By interrupting his sermon
  - (c) By kissing him
  - (d) By announcing that she has seen him with her mother
16. What mark can supposedly be seen on Dimmesdale's chest?
- (a) A scarlet letter "A"                      (b) A tattoo
  - (c) The mark of the devil                      (d) A red rose
17. How do Hester and Dimmesdale plan to escape their suffering?
- (a) By going to live with the Native Americans
  - (b) By boarding a ship bound for Europe
  - (c) By killing Chillingworth
  - (d) By committing suicide
18. How does Pearl become wealthy?
- (a) She discovers pirates' treasure.
  - (b) She marries the governor's son
  - (c) She inherits Chillingworth's estate and marries a nobleman.
  - (d) She becomes a famous actress and dancer.
19. Where does the narrator first encounter Hester Prynne's story?
- (a) He finds a manuscript in the attic of the Salem Custom-House.
  - (b) He hears it from an elderly aunt.
  - (c) He hears it from one of the old men who work at the Salem Custom-House.
  - (d) It comes to him in a dream.
20. What item of clothing does Hester make for Governor Winthrop?
- (a) A cloak for his swearing-in                      (b) A nightcap
  - (c) A pair of gloves                      (d) A winter hat
21. What color of clothing does Hester always wear?
- (a) Scarlet                      (b) White
  - (c) Black                      (d) Gray
22. Where do Hester and Pearl live?
- (a) In the poorhouse
  - (b) In an abandoned cottage on the outskirts of Boston

- (c) In the forest  
(d) In the house of Roger Chillingworth
23. What does Chillingworth pretend to be?  
(a) A minister (b) A doctor  
(c) A madman (d) A scholar
24. What does Hester's letter "A" eventually come to represent to the townspeople?  
(a) "Able" (b) "Alone" (c) "Avaricious"  
(d) "Absolutely Admirable"
25. Why does the narrator lose his job in the customhouse?  
(a) He is incompetent.  
(b) He spends too much time writing when he should be working.  
(c) The other inspectors dislike him personally.  
(d) A new customhouse president, who is of a different party than the narrator, is elected.

### ■ Short Answers Type Questions

1. Did Hester ever love Chillingworth?
2. What type of work does Chillingworth take on in New England?
3. What does Dimmesdale believe he sees when the meteor lights up the right sky?
4. How does Pearl react when she first sees her mother without the scarlet A?
5. What does Hester do after Dimmesdale's death?
6. What is the purpose of "The Custom-House"?
7. What is the first clue that Dimmesdale is Pearl's father?
8. What are Hester Prynne's secrets?
9. What is Reverend Dimmesdale's illness?
10. Why is Roger Chillingworth called "the leech"?
11. How does Hester Prynne's reputation change in the course of the novel?
12. What makes Hester and Reverend Dimmesdale finally feel hope about their future?
13. Why does Hester choose the forest to meet Dimmesdale and Chillingworth?
14. What events mark the novel's climax?
15. What does the last sentence of the novel mean?

### ■ Long Answers Type Questions

1. What is significant about the novel's title?
2. *The Scarlet Letter* is considered a romance by many literary scholars. Do you think that is an accurate categorization? Why or why not?

3. Is Hester Prynne an admirable character? Why or why not?
4. How does Hester evolve through the course of the story?
5. How do we learn the true character of Roger Chillingworth? Is he believable as a villain?
6. Is Arthur Dimmesdale an admirable character? How would you describe him and his relationship with Hester?
7. What does Pearl symbolize? How is her name significant?
8. What is the significance of Pearl not recognizing Hester without her scarlet 'A'?
9. What is the moral statement Hawthorne is making throughout *The Scarlet Letter*?
10. Do you agree with what how Hawthorne interprets the shortcomings of Puritan society?
11. What are some symbols in *The Scarlet Letter*? How do they relate to the plot and characters?
12. Does the story end the way you expected? What's significant about the novel's ending?
13. Would you consider *The Scarlet Letter* to be a work of feminist literature? Why or why not?
14. How essential are the settings, both geographical and temporal, to the story? Could the story have taken place anywhere else or in any other time period?
15. Does this novel give you a better appreciation for how women were treated in early New England? Does it give you a new perspective on other events from the region's history, such as the Salem Witch Trials?

### Answers

#### ➤ Multiple Choice Questions

- |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| 1. (b)  | 2. (d)  | 3. (a)  | 4. (b)  | 5. (a)  | 6. (b)  | 7. (d)  | 8. (c)  |
| 9. (a)  | 10. (c) | 11. (b) | 12. (a) | 13. (b) | 14. (a) | 15. (c) | 16. (a) |
| 17. (b) | 18. (c) | 19. (a) | 20. (c) | 21. (d) | 22. (b) | 23. (b) | 24. (a) |
| 25. (d) |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |



**THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN  
(Mark Twain)****Chapter 1****Summary**

The novel begins with Huck Finn introducing himself and referencing *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. "You don't know about me", Huck narrates, "without you have read a book by the name of 'The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,' but that ain't no matter. He tells readers that, for the most part, Twain told the truth in *Tom Sawyer* but that everyone tells some lies, even people like Aunt Polly and the Widow Douglas.

Huck gives a brief summary of how he and Tom got six thousand dollars each at the end of *Tom Sawyer*. Judge Thatcher has taken Huck's money and invested it with a dollar of interest coming in each day, and Huck now lives with the Widow Douglas and her sister, Miss Watson. The sisters are, as Huck puts it, trying to "sivilize" him, and his frustration at living in a clean house and minding his manners starts to grow. Miss Watson tells Huck he will go to "the bad place" if he does not behave, and Huck thinks that will be okay as long as Miss Watson is not there.

During the evening, Huck accidentally kills a spider that was on his shoulder and worries that bad luck will follow. When the town clock strikes twelve midnight, Huck hears a noise outside his window and climbs out to find Tom Sawyer waiting for him.

**Analysis**

The opening sentence of the novel notifies readers that Huck Finn is the narrator and will tell his story in his own words, in his own language and dialect (complete with grammatical errors and misspellings), and from his own point of view. By using the first person narrative point of view, Twain carries on the southwestern humor tradition of vernacular language; that is, Huck sounds as a young, uneducated boy from Missouri should sound.

This first sentence also alludes to *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. The allusion reminds the reader of a novel about boys and their adventures, the purpose of which, according to Twain, was to rekindle in adults memories "of how they felt and thought and talked, and what queer enterprises they

sometimes engaged in." Then Huck - and Twain - dismiss the work with "But that ain't no matter." Although the boyish type adventure episodes tend to reappear as a plot motif in *Huck Finn*, especially in the sections including Tom, their primary purpose is more to communicate criticism of Twain's contemporary society than to evoke fond memories. This statement also makes clear that it does not matter whether readers have read Twain's earlier book or not. *Huck Finn* is Huck's story, and he will tell it from his natural, unsophisticated perspective.

This first chapter introduces several major literary elements. Humor is used in various ways in the novel, but Huck's deadpan narration and pragmatic personality juxtaposed to events and beliefs that make no logical or practical sense to him provide much of the novel's humor. Because Huck is young and uncivilized, he describes events and people in a direct manner without any extensive commentary. Huck does not laugh at humorous situations and statements simply because his literal approach does not find them to be funny; he fails to see the irony. He does not project social, religious, cultural, or conceptual nuances into situations because he has never learned them. For example, when Miss Watson tells Huck that "she was going to live so as to go to the good place [heaven]," Huck, applying what he knows about Miss Watson and the obvious lifestyle that makes her happy, responds that he "couldn't see no advantage in going where she was going," and makes up his mind to not try to get there. Huck does not intend his comment to be disrespectful or sarcastic; it is simply a statement of fact and is indicative of the literal, practical approach to life that he exhibits throughout the novel.

The first chapter also serves to introduce an important thematic image that pervades the work: natural, free individualism contrasted with the expectations of society. Huck feels confined by the social expectations of civilization and wants to return to his simple, carefree life. He dislikes the social and cultural trappings of clean clothes, Bible studies, spelling lessons, and manners that he is forced to follow. Huck cannot understand why people would want to live under such circumstances, and he longs to be able to return to his previous life where no one tries to "sivilize" him.

The contrast between freedom and civilization permeates the novel, and Huck's struggle for natural freedom (freedom from society) mirrors the more important struggle of Jim, who struggles for social freedom (freedom within the society). Both Huck and Jim search for freedom during their adventure down the Mississippi, and both find that civilization presents a large obstacle to obtaining their dream. From the beginning, readers realize that civilization is filled with certain hypocrisies, including religion and the practice of slavery.

Huck's candid narration gives Twain the opportunity to make barbed comments about literary and social institutions of the nineteenth century. The barbed comments range from his literary aversion to the novels of authors such as James Fenimore Cooper (*Last of the Mohicans*) to overt religious hypocrisies such as the Christian acceptance of slavery in his boyhood town.

The historical realities of slavery and racial division are, without doubt, the most important and most controversial elements in *Huck Finn*. Imbedded in the contrast between freedom and civilization is the issue of slavery, and the inclusion of the pejorative slang term "niggers" in the first chapter prepares readers for the similar coarse language that will follow. In order to depict the region and the attitude in a realistic manner, Twain makes a conscious choice not to edit regional bigotry and the language that accompanies it.

The reader should remain aware of two major points while reading this novel: First, the novel is a satire; that is, irony, sarcasm, or caustic wit are used to attack or expose folly, vice, or stupidity. Second, the novel is first person narrative (told from Huck's point of view). Confusing either of these issues can lead the unsophisticated reader to drastic misinterpretations. The feelings and interpretations of situations, issues, and events advanced by Huck are not necessarily those the author is advocating.

By the end of this first chapter, the reader has gathered a good deal of data about Huck: his mother is dead, his father is the town drunk, he has "a dollar a day .... all the year round" income, he lacks "book learning," hates the "sivilized" ways, is keenly observant of details around him, and is a realist.

## Chapter 2

### Summary

As Huck and Tom sneak off from the Widow Douglas' house, Huck trips, and the noise alerts Miss Watson's slave, Jim. Jim tries to find what made the noise and almost discovers the boys, but after a while he falls asleep. While Jim is sleeping, Tom takes Jim's hat and hangs it on a tree-limb. Afterwards, Jim tells everyone that witches put a spell on him and took him all over the state. Jim's story grows with each telling until finally slaves come from all over to hear Jim's tale of being bewitched. After this episode, he is considered an authority on witches.

Huck and Tom meet the rest of the town boys, and they all go to a hidden cave two miles down the river. In the cave, Tom declares that the band of robbers will be called "Tom Sawyer's Gang" and "Everybody that wants to join has got to take an oath, and write his name in blood." The boys all swear that, if a gang member tells the gang's secrets, they will cut his throat and then kill that boy's family. One of the boys says the oath is not fair because Huck Finn

does not have a family unless you count a father who can never be found. A solution is found when Huck offers Miss Watson as his family and says, "they could kill her."

Using pirate books as a reference, Tom describes the future business of the gang as robbery and murder. The other boys wonder why everything must be so complicated and involve ransoms and guards, and Tom replies that he's "seen it in books; and so of course that's what we've got to do."

### **Analysis**

Chapter 2 introduces Jim, Huck's future companion and friend. In Missouri, most slaves were domestic servants, not workers on plantations that most people today identify with slavery. Jim's initial behaviors as interpreted through Huck are stereotypical traits attributed to blacks at the time: laziness, a tendency toward exaggeration, and conceit. Jim's belief in superstition mirrors that of Huck, and his explanations of what had happened to him that night could be interpreted to reveal either a gullible nature or an opportunist who makes the most of the circumstances that he encounters. Twain not only taps Huck's prejudices in the early portrayal of Jim, but he also taps the prejudices of the reader. Jim gains handsomely from his witch adventure and wisely uses the fictional kidnapping to boost his stature among his peers. Nevertheless, the suggestion that Jim displays negative traits has been partially responsible for the opposition to teaching Huck Finn in the classroom.

The character of Jim, however, is much more complex than the sleepy man who has seen the devil and been kidnapped by witches. Moreover, this simplistic interpretation of Jim in the beginning of the novel enhances the prejudicial nature of the stereotype when the true depth of his character is revealed later in the novel. As readers learn about Huck, they also learn about Jim and the admirable character he is.

Also introduced in Chapter 2 is the character of Tom Sawyer. Tom is a contrasting character (a foil) to Huck, despite their obvious bond and friendship. Tom is a romantic, insensitive representative of the society Huck dislikes. His tendency is to take control, romanticize, and exaggerate all situations. Tom bases his expertise in adventures on the many pirate and robber books he has read. His humorous exaggerations symbolize Twain's dislike of popular and glorified romantic novels. Later, in Chapter 3, Tom mentions Don Quixote as a model of the romantic novels. Ironically, Cervantes was satirizing romantic adventure stories in this work much the same as Twain does in this work. Obviously, Tom was unaware of the satiric nature of the novel, but Twain was not.

Unlike the playful humor of Tom Sawyer, the humor of Huck Finn is bitter satire using the hypocrisy, violence, and squalor in the society that Twain

observed. For example, when Tom decides that the gang will rob and murder people "except some that you bring to the cave here and keep them till they're ransomed," the boys discover that no one, including Tom, knows the meaning of "ransom." The boys assign a meaning to the word by conjecturing what it means ("keep them until they are dead"). This meaning, of course, is wrong, but, as in the greater society, because the group believes it to be true, it becomes their truth, and the rest of their action is based on this error, a serious subject matter undercut by humor.

### Chapter 3

#### Summary

The next day, Huck receives a scolding from Miss Watson because of his dirty clothes, but the Widow Douglas does not reproach him at all. Miss Watson explains to Huck that, through prayer, he can have anything he wants. She makes Huck pray for the next few days, and Huck does not understand why the fishhooks he prays for never arrive.

During this time, Huck is told that his father, Pap Finn, has been found drowned in the river. Because the body was floating on his back, the superstitious Huck does not believe it is Pap and worries that the violent Pap will show up again. The Tom Sawyer Gang disbands because the only adventure they have is attempting to rob a Sunday-school picnic.

#### Analysis

In Chapter 3, the practical Huck again struggles to understand religion. When Miss Watson tells Huck he can receive anything he wants through prayer, the literal Huck believes he can receive fishing gear. He contemplates the concept of prayer and wonders why, if someone can get anything, he cannot get any fish-hooks, the widow cannot reclaim her stolen silver snuff-box, and Miss Watson cannot "fat up"? The humorous moment is another example of Huck's literal approach to his surroundings. Because Huck takes everything at face value, he cannot understand the concept of prayer or "spiritual gifts." He does not reject religion, but his literal mindset has difficulty with beliefs that, on the surface, appear to be impractical or untrue.

More important, Huck's struggle compares and contrasts the religions of the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson as he begins to see that religion is practiced differently by his guardians. Through Huck, Twain is exploring his own reservations about religion and its ties to the institution of slavery. It is not incidental that it is Miss Watson who owns Jim and not the Widow Douglas, and Huck continues to question religion and the rules of his society. Huck eventually decides that there are two kinds of Providence, and he would like to avoid Miss Watson's and go to the one the Widow Douglas describes.



Chapter 3 continues to establish Tom and Huck as contrasting characters. Whereas Huck takes a literal approach to everything he sees and hears, Tom's knowledge comes solely from the books he reads. At the same time Huck questions religion, he begins to see Tom's "magicians and A-rabs" as fabrication. For Huck, Tom's imagination has the same quality as Miss Watson's religion, and he distrusts the superficial nature of both. This approach serves Huck well throughout the novel. Although he does not completely understand prayer, he does understand the widow's explanation that he "must help other people . . . and look out for them all the time, and never think about myself." By applying his own conscience and beliefs, Huck grows as a character and is able to form his own opinions and not blindly accept society's values and the status quo.

## Chapter 4

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### Summary

Three or four months have passed when Huck finds a suspicious footprint in the snow outside of the widow's house. Because of a cross carved in the heel, the print looks exactly like Pap Finn's boot, and Huck begins to worry that Pap has returned. To protect the reward money from Pap, Huck goes to see Judge Thatcher and tries to persuade Judge Thatcher to take the money for his own.

Because Jim is rumored to have the ability to do magic, Huck asks him if he can predict what Pap will do and where he will stay. When Huck asks Jim about Pap's plans, Jim places a hairball on the ground and listens for Huck's fortune. Jim says that there are two angels hovering over Pap - one white and one black - and he does not know which way Pap will decide to live his life. Jim also says that, just like Pap Finn, Huck has two angels over him, trying to help him decide the right path. When Huck returns to his room that night, he finds Pap waiting for him.

### Analysis

When Pap's tracks appear, Huck would rather give his money away than risk confronting Pap. He knows that Pap is inspired only by whisky or greed, and if Huck is poor, perhaps Pap will leave him alone. In the previous chapter, Pap is described as a town vagrant who "used to lay drunk with the hogs in the tanyard" and Huck is not affected by the description. But Huck's indifference to Pap's reputation changes when he realizes Pap is back in town. Huck's fear is understated, but it suggests that his previous life with Pap was violent and dis-functional. Moreover, the subtle threat of abuse underscores the theme of a chaotic and violent environment after the Civil War, an environment that Huck cannot entirely avoid despite his plans and cunning.

Chapter 4 continues to document that Huck and Jim are superstitious and are products of their society and their circumstances. When Jim uses the hairball to discover Pap's intentions, Jim ends up forecasting Huck's future more than Pap's, and the similarities between the two are obvious. According to Jim, both Pap and Huck have "two angels hoverin" over them, and the future is uncertain. Jim warns Huck to stay away from the water because it is his fate to be hanged. The darkness in Huck's future, then, relates directly to the Mississippi River, and it is predestined ("down in de bills") that Huck will suffer because of it. The inclusion of predestination reflects Twain's Calvinist background. More important, however, the battle of the two angels foreshadows Huck's future battle with his conscience in terms of Jim's freedom.

## **Chapters 5-6**

### **Summary**

That evening, Huck discovers Pap in his room. After the initial shock, Huck decides Pap is too disheveled to be a threat. Pap's hair is "long and tangled and greasy," his face is extremely pale, and his clothes are in rags. Pap immediately notices how clean Huck is in comparison and then begins a tirade about Huck attending school and trying to be more of a man than his father.

Over the next few days, Pap tries to get Huck's money from Judge Thatcher and gain custody of Huck. Pap is unable to get any money, except when he takes a dollar or two directly from Huck. Although the widow wants to raise Huck, Pap convinces a new judge that he has changed and will start a life free from alcohol and sin. The new judge decides that "he'd druther not take a child away from its father" and grants custody to Pap. The new judge finally realizes he has been taken for a fool, however, when Pap sneaks out and breaks his arm after getting "drunk as a fiddler."

Instead of avoiding school, Huck attends just to spite Pap. When the widow tells Pap to stop loitering around her house, Pap kidnaps Huck and takes him upriver to the Illinois shore. The widow discovers Huck's location and sends a man to rescue him, but Pap drives the man off with a gun.

After a couple of months, Pap's beatings become too harsh and too frequent, and Huck decides to escape. The same night as Huck's decision, Pap gets extremely drunk and begins to denounce the government for its laws and the positive treatment of African-Americans. Eventually both Pap and Huck fall asleep, and Huck wakes up to find Pap screaming about snakes and calling Huck the "Angel of Death."

### **Analysis**

Upon discovering Pap, Huck's first thoughts are of the beatings that Pap used to give him. When Huck sees Pap's appearance, however, he immediately

is put at ease. Pap's disheveled appearance does not frighten Huck; instead, Pap appears as a clown or buffoon with exaggerated features. The appearance is similar to other exaggerated frontier characters in American humor, but Pap is more than a caricature; he is the most evil character in the novel, and he is white, "a white to make a body sick, a white to make a body's flesh crawl."

Pap's threats are humorous because of the obvious irony; how could a father not be proud of his son learning to read? But as in Chapter 4, the threats are laced with the realization that Huck has been beaten by Pap before. Huck stays captive for the next couple of months and begins to enjoy his old life, free from manners, education, and religion. Huck's "free" life with Pap, however, comes at the price of physical abuse.

Pap's miserable character represents yet another negative element of society. Pap exudes bigotry and hate. His ludicrous tirade against the government and blacks is pathetically comical because of his obvious arrogance and ignorance and the slapstick humor involved in Huck's description. The irony, however, is more painful than it is humorous because it symbolizes a common racist attitude built on ignorance and insecurity.

When Pap calls Huck the Angel of Death at the end of Chapter 6, the name appears to be one of Pap's hallucinations. The label is important, however, and foreshadows the numerous deaths that Huck encounters as he escapes down the Mississippi.

## Chapter 7

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### Summary

The next day Huck finds a drifting canoe on the rising river. When Pap leaves for the night to go drinking, Huck escapes through a hole he sawed in the cabin wall. He takes all the cabin's supplies and puts them in the canoe; he then shoots a wild hog and uses its blood to make it look as if he were murdered. By staging his own murder, Huck thinks he can escape without the threat of being followed. At dark, he leaves in the canoe and eventually lands downstream at Jackson's Island.

### Analysis

Twain gives the readers another literary glimpse of the river that enchanted him throughout his life and career. The quiet Mississippi quickly lulls Huck to sleep. The river becomes symbolic of Huck's more peaceful, natural life. The description is important, because it underscores the serenity of the river and of nature in general as opposed to the harsh and chaotic world on shore. Throughout the novel, Twain continues to outline the difference between the two worlds, and the juxtaposition of the peaceful river and brutal shore has often been described as the "raft/shore dichotomy."

Huck's flight shows his creativity and cleverness, but it also establishes a logical method of escape. Every action Huck performs, from placing blood on an axe to dragging a bag full of meal, is practical and works to help his plan. The escape is efficient, and although Huck wishes Tom were there to "throw in the fancy touches," readers realize that Tom's additions would create more problems than solutions. Huck's practicality is evident not only in his narrative reaction to events but also in his physical actions. The self-reliant characteristic aids Huck well in the future, as he faces decisions that require individual thought and rejection of accepted beliefs.

## Chapter 8

### Summary

Huck wakes up on Jackson's Island to hear a ferryboat firing a cannon. He knows that this will bring a drowned body to the surface and realizes that they must be searching for him. Huck also remembers that another way to find a body is with a loaf of bread filled with quicksilver. He scouts the shoreline and finds a large loaf, then wonders if prayer really works. Someone, after all, had prayed that the bread find his body, and that prayer had worked.

Confident that he is now safe, Huck explores the island until he stumbles upon fresh campfire ashes. Huck climbs a tree for safety but curiosity sends him back to the site, and he discovers Miss Watson's slave, Jim. After convincing Jim that he is not a ghost, Huck learns that Jim has run away because Miss Watson was going to sell him down the river to New Orleans.

During the evening, Jim impresses Huck with his knowledge of superstition.

### Analysis

Huck's contemplation of prayer brims with humor as he tries to fathom the logic of how the quicksilver bread found him. The combination of a superstitious practice (quicksilver bread) and a religious custom (prayer) shows that Huck's beliefs include a portion of both. As reluctant as he is to embrace Miss Watson's religion, he still holds a fearful respect of its power. The same is true for the practice of superstition.

When Huck first stumbles upon Jim, he does not immediately ask why Jim is on the island, nor does he worry that Jim will tell anyone he is alive. Instead, Huck's first reaction is one of joy at the companionship. More important, Jim's reintroduction extends the important theme of freedom and civilization from Huck to Jim, and sets up the circumstances that will lead to their odyssey down the Mississippi.

Huck's continued struggle with society's restrictions and laws now includes the more serious issue of race and slavery. Huck's comment that

“people would call me a low-down Abolitionist and despise me for keeping mum” shows that his society does not tolerate those who denounce slavery. This is Huck’s first important break with society, but a break that would make his return nearly impossible, as he realizes. The stance is similar to Twain’s own boyhood experience where slavery was an accepted practice in the South. Although Huck has shown the tendency to reject society’s beliefs, he cannot immediately dismiss its influence and teachings.

This chapter also serves to establish the relationship between Huck and Jim and their roles in contrast to one another. Whereas Huck’s initial representation of Jim was stereotypical, in this chapter, Jim quickly reveals himself as an authority on superstition. Huck’s literal nature does not allow him to be impressed easily, but his belief in signs and superstition elevates Jim, who “knowed all kinds.” In addition, Twain was fond of using a twin image in order to develop his themes. In some works the image is obvious (for example, Pudd’nhead Wilson and *The Prince and the Pauper*). In others, the image is more subtle. In this work, Tom and Huck are twins with differing dominate personality characteristics: Tom, the romantic, and Huck, the realist. Likewise, Jim and Huck are twin-like, each searching for his own kind of freedom, but one black, the other white.

## **Chapters 9-10**

### **Summary**

After exploring Jackson’s Island, Jim and Huck find a cavern to hide in high on a steep ridge. They hide the canoe and then haul their traps and supplies up to the cavern. Huck thinks the location is too difficult to reach, but Jim argues that it will help protect them against people and the rain. Just as Jim predicted in Chapter 8, a large storm comes.

The river rises for 10 or 12 days, and the flooding waters give Jim and Huck the opportunity to explore and capture useful debris. One night, they discover a two-story frame house drifting along. Inside the house, Jim sees a dead man and instructs Huck not to look at the dead man’s face because “. . . it’s too gashly.” Avoiding the body, they search the house and find an “old speckled straw hat,” among the clothes, bottles, and other household items.

Back at the cavern, Huck tries to get Jim to discuss the dead man, but Jim avoids the subject saying it would bring bad luck and the man could “ha’nt us.” They search the odds and ends they took from the floating house and discover eight dollars in an overcoat.

Because of the money and supplies, Huck argues that they are having good luck despite what Jim has told him. Later, Huck tries to play a prank on Jim and places a dead rattlesnake at the foot of Jim’s blanket. When Jim lies



down to sleep, the snake's mate is there and bites him. Jim is sick for several days and uses Pap's whisky to kill the pain of the snakebite. Eventually, he regains his strength, and Huck realizes the danger of defying superstition and Jim's expertise.

After a few days, Huck and Jim decide to sneak into town to learn of any news. Huck disguises himself as a girl and goes to the shanty of a woman he does not know.

### **Analysis**

Jim's ability to predict the storm is an understated but important moment in the novel. As readers are aware, Pap Finn does not fulfill the role of father or parent except when it is convenient to Pap. In contrast, Jim's protective and caring nature is clear throughout the novel. An example of Jim's parental role is when he does not allow Huck to view the face of the body on the floating house. The motion is subtle, but the protective action is more apparent later in the last chapter of the novel when readers learn that the dead man is Pap.

With the discovery of the dead man, Huck's earlier label as the "Angel of Death" comes into play again in Chapters 9 and 10. Despite the fabrications of death and the superstitions surrounding it, Huck does not confront death until he and Jim discover the body inside the house. Huck's initial reluctance is replaced by a strong curiosity with the man and the events that caused his demise. "I couldn't keep from studying over it wishing I knowed who shot the man, and what they done it for," Huck says.

In contrast to Jim's protective nature, Huck plays the first of three failed pranks directed at Jim. Despite his respect for Jim's knowledge of superstition, Huck still acts in a careless and impractical manner, and the first prank results in Jim's snakebite. Huck's regret at the outcome demonstrates the growth of his character and indicates that Huck does value Jim as a companion and a friend. This value, however, is pitted against Huck's belief that he should turn Jim in to authorities. The result is a constant clash between Huck's feelings of admiration and friendship for Jim and his fear of being judged for helping a runaway slave.

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## **Chapter 11**

### **Summary**

Still in disguise, Huck enters the woman's house and introduces himself as "Sarah Williams from Hookerville." Accepting Huck as a girl, the woman talks freely about the town's events and eventually reaches the subject of Huck and Tom, the reward money, and Huck's "murder." Suspicion began with Pap Finn, she says, but after Jim escaped, the town decided that the runaway slave

had murdered Huck. With both Pap and Jim still suspects, the town has announced a reward of \$300 for Jim and \$200 for Pap.

The woman tells Huck she thinks she knows where Jim could be hiding, for she is sure she has seen smoke over at Jackson's Island. Huck becomes nervous when he learns that the woman's husband and another man are heading for Jackson's Island to search for Jim. Before Huck can leave, the woman figures out that he is not a girl, and Huck makes up yet another wild tale for explanation.

Huck rushes back to Jackson's Island and wakes Jim with the news that "There ain't a minute to lose. They're after us!" In complete silence, the two runaways pack their camp and head down the river on the raft.

### **Analysis**

Chapter 11 displays yet another facet of Huck Finn's humor; that is, the ability of Huck to disguise himself and convince gullible adults to believe his preposterous stories. Huck is, indeed, an imaginative trickster who lies and fibs his way along the Mississippi. (These traits are one reason that authors such as Louisa May Alcott condemned his character as being unsuitable for young readers.) Huck is also prone, however, to forget his early stories, and therefore he is forced to invent new tales in order to continue his deception. The constantly changing fabrication is certainly comical and displays the creative ability of Huck as well as the ignorance of the people he meets.

The fact that the woman fools Huck into revealing his identity as a boy also provides much of the humor in the chapter. Despite his maverick nature, Huck is a product of the environment and thus is subject to the same type of manipulation that he performs on others. The tricks that the woman uses force Huck to reveal his male nature, his "boy" characteristics (the inability to thread a needle, for example). Even though the woman discovers Huck is not a girl, Huck is still able to save his story by donning another disguise as an orphaned and mistreated apprentice. The added story is yet another example of Huck's ability to succeed and adapt in a world of scams and con artists.

The readers should note that Chapter 11 ends with Huck and Jim functioning as a team. When Huck discovers that Jim is in danger, he does not think about society's judgment and simply reacts. In Huck's view, the pursuing men are after both of them, even though the consequences for Huck would be minimal. In other words, Huck unconsciously places Jim's safety above his own, and their separate struggles for freedom become one. As Huck and Jim slip "past the foot of the island dead still, never saying a word," Twain takes another step away from the childish adventures of Tom Sawyer and cements the relationship between the two outcasts.

### Summary

Jim and Huck continue down the river between the Missouri mountains and the “heavy timber” of Illinois, hiding the raft during the day and running several hours at night. The fifth night after they pass St. Louis, they come upon a steamboat crippled on a rock. Although Jim does not want to board the wreck and argues that they should ignore it, Huck convinces him that they need to explore.

On board, they overhear voices and see that two men have tied up a third and are discussing his fate. Certain that the wreck will come loose and sink, the two men decide to leave the tied man to a watery death. When Jim tries to untie the men’s skiff and trap them on the wreck, he discovers the raft has broken loose and floated away. While the men are inside the cabin, Huck and Jim take the skiff and leave the wreck. Eventually they find the raft and pull the skiff and the men’s supplies up on the deck.

When they come upon a village, Huck finds a ferryboat watchman and begins another elaborate story. He tells him that his family is up on the steamboat wreck, which readers learn is named the Walter Scott. The man hurries off to sound the alarm with visions of a reward in front of him.

Later that evening, Huck sees the wreck, which has come loose from the rocks and is quietly sinking as it drifts down the river.

### Analysis

Twain’s decision to name the boat the Walter Scott continues his mockery of romantic novels and their authors. The wreck’s importance to the novel, however, is found in the contrasting images of peace and brutality and Huck’s inevitable deliberations on death.

Chapter 12 signals a separation from Huck and Jim’s familiar surroundings as the two begin their journey down the Mississippi. The peaceful images of the river are similar to those that readers have seen in the many film adaptations of *Huck Finn*: Huck and Jim on a large and comfortable raft, free from outside interference and enjoying the serenity of their new life. Although the river is seen as a safe haven for Huck and Jim, the viciousness of the shore arrives in the form of the Walter Scott wreck. In this manner, Twain is able to interrupt the peaceful environment of the river by combining it with the brutality of men. The pattern is one that will recur when the duke and the king board the raft in Chapter 19.

Despite their savageness and unfeeling attitude, Huck cannot help but “worry about the men” as he leaves them to die. Huck’s compassion is evident,

and he does attempt to save the men by alerting the ferryboat watchman. The "Angel of Death," however, claims more victims as the *Walter Scott* breaks apart and sinks.

## Chapter 14

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### Summary

The next day, Jim and Huck go through the spoils they got from the gang on the *Walter Scott*. Huck's excitement about their new treasure is tempered by Jim's fear that they might have been caught or drowned. After listening to Jim, Huck realizes that, as usual, Jim is right.

Among the blankets, clothes, and cigars, Huck finds a few books and reads to Jim about romantic figures like kings, dukes, and earls. When the discussion turns to royalty and King Solomon, Huck and Jim debate Solomon's logic and refuse to agree on his wisdom.

### Analysis

Chapter 14 continues to define Huck and Jim's roles, with Jim constantly proving himself as the more practical and mature person despite Huck's ability to read. Initially, Huck accepts Jim's rationale when he describes why the *Walter Scott* presented so much danger. Huck's admission that "... he [Jim] was most always right" is undercut, however, by his statement that Jim "... had an uncommon level head, for a nigger." The vulgar label - which, of course, Huck does not recognize as vulgar - shows that Huck still has not accepted Jim as an intellectual or human equal, in spite of the fact that Jim continues to show superior logic, and Huck continues to grow fonder of him.

When the two discuss King Solomon, Jim's practical but single-minded approach cannot convince Huck that Solomon "warn't no wise man nuther." Readers, however, are able to see that it is Huck, and not Jim, who misses the point. The real point, as Jim says, "is down funder - it's down deeper." The statement foreshadows the debate of conscience that Huck undergoes later in the novel.

## Chapters 15-16

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### Summary

Jim and Huck believe that three more nights will bring them to Cairo, Illinois, and, from that point, they can take a steamboat up the Ohio River to the free states. On the second night, however, a dense fog rolls in, and the strong current separates Huck and Jim. After calling in vain for Jim, Huck decides to take "one little cat-nap" and wakes up several hours later under a clear sky.

He eventually finds Jim, who is in tears over seeing Huck again. Instead of celebrating their reunion, Huck decides to act as if Jim has been dreaming and Huck has been on the raft the entire night. Jim's concern turns to confusion, but he finally realizes Huck is lying. He admonishes Huck for the prank and says that only "trash" would treat a friend like that. After a few minutes, Huck feels so ashamed that he apologizes to Jim.

Jim and Huck decide that Huck must go ashore to check their progress. Jim's excitement is obvious, and Huck struggles with his shame of helping a slave escape. When Jim says he will steal his children out of slavery if necessary, Huck decides he must go ashore and turn Jim in to the authorities. Instead of rushing ashore at dawn to free his conscience, however, Huck covers for Jim when he runs into townspeople.

Shortly after, Huck and Jim see the clear water of the Ohio River and realize they have passed Cairo in the fog. They decide to buy another canoe to head upriver, but a steamboat wrecks the raft and the two are once again separated.

### **Analysis**

Before 1991, critics largely believed that Twain stopped writing after Chapter 16 and set the manuscript aside. The assertion appears logical, for Cairo is, indeed, the original destination of Jim and Huck. If Huck and Jim make it to Cairo, they can head north up the Ohio River, and the story heads toward its conclusion. It is obvious that Twain was struggling with the novel's direction, but the 1991 discovery of the first half of the Huck Finn manuscript revealed that Twain had continued through Chapter 18 and then set aside the manuscript for two years.

Although Huck is distraught at the thought of losing Jim, he does play the horrible prank, which contrasts sharply with Jim's parental demeanor. Tom, no doubt, would have been proud of Huck's creativity and imagination, but Huck realizes that he has done more than embarrass Jim; he has taken advantage of his trust and friendship. The elaborate joke wounds Jim, and Huck is not prepared for Jim's confession that his "heart wuz mos' broke bekase you wuz los', en I didn' k'yer no' mo' what become er me en de raf'." Jim's somber comment serves, in a sense, to break the heart of Huck, and readers realize, just as Huck does, that Jim would give his life for the young boy who has always been on the opposite side of societal laws.

Huck's comment that it took him 15 minutes to apologize is overshadowed only by the fact that he actually does. In Jim and Huck's squalid world, an apology from a white person to a slave is not only unnecessary, it is scandalous. Huck, however, does not regret his decision to apologize and learns another lesson about Jim's loyalty. He does not play another prank on Jim, but he



continues to feel guilt over helping a slave. The irony of the situation is painful, as Huck condemns himself for protecting Jim instead of recognizing the heroics involved.

By passing Cairo, Twain is able to navigate the familiar setting of the Mississippi River and the South. The passage down-river also allows Huck to continue his battle between his instincts and what society dictates he should do. Despite his shame from the prank, Huck still struggles with his conscience. His decision to turn Jim in details the twisted logic of slavery that condemns a man for wanting to rescue his children from captivity. The biting satire is obvious, as is the realization that Huck cannot defy society's moral code of racism without a struggle. He is, after all, resisting all the social and cultural reasoning that made slavery possible.

When the two men searching for ran away slaves surprise Huck, however, he develops an elaborate story that saves Jim. Once again Huck's actions mirror his natural conscience. Huck is constantly pulled between what he is supposed to think and feel (that is, what he has been taught either by lessons or social example) and what he actually feels and thinks (that is, what he has developed through his personal and natural experiences). He finds himself aiding Jim, who grows more certain of Huck's loyalty and friendship.

## **Chapters 17-18**

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### **Summary**

Once on shore, Huck finds himself at an impressive log house owned by the Grangerford family. After they are convinced that Huck is not a member of the Shepherdson family, the Grangerfords take Huck in, give him warm clothes, and feed him. Huck tells everyone that his name is George Jackson and that he fell off a passing steamboat.

The Grangerfords have a son named Buck, who is about Huck's age, and the two become close friends over the next few days. Huck admires the stately house with its large fireplaces, ornate door locks, and elaborate decor. The morbid paintings and poetry of Emmeline, a deceased daughter of the Grangerfords, also fascinate him.

Huck soon learns that the Grangerfords share a steamboat landing with another aristocratic family named Shepherdson. When Huck and Buck go hunting, Buck takes a shot at young Harney Shepherdson and misses. While the boys run away, Huck notices that Harney has a chance to shoot Buck but rides away instead. Huck wonders about Harney but finally decides he was going after his hat. In response to Huck's questions, Buck explains that the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons have been feuding for so long that no one remembers why it began in the first place.

After Huck delivers a message for Sophia Grangerford, he is taken over to the swamp by one of the family's many slaves. Among the trees, Huck finds Jim, who says that he has found the raft. The next day, Miss Sophia elopes with Harney Shepherdson. The bizarre feud escalates, and several men on both sides of the family are killed, including Buck. Huck regrets ever coming ashore and cannot tell us "all that happened" because it would make him sick to do so. He rejoins Jim, and the two decide a raft is the best home.

### **Analysis**

The introduction of the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons adds a new element of humor to Twain's novel. Whereas earlier Twain satirizes the actions of "common" townspeople, the stately families provide a perfect opportunity for Twain to burlesque the Southern code of chivalry and aristocracy of the antebellum South. The Grangerford's house represents a gaudy and tasteless display of wealth, and Huck's appreciation of the decor only adds to the humor. The decor that exemplifies the Grangerford's taste is the artistic work of Emmeline, the deceased daughter who pined away after failing to discover a rhyme for "Whistler." In contrast to Huck's practical fascination with death, Emmeline's work displays a romantic and sentimental obsession that even gives Huck the "fantods."

Twain also uses the families to underscore his subtle satire on religion, as the two families attend the same church, leaning their guns against the walls during the sermon about "brotherly love." The mixture of theology and gunplay is ironic, as is the family's subsequent reaction that the sermon was filled with positive messages about "faith and good work and free grace and preforeordination." Twain's Calvinist background resurfaces in his combination of predestination and foreordination.

The feud between the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons is one of the more memorable chapters in *Huck Finn* because of its extreme violence. The fact that the two noble families do not know why they continue to fight is ironic, but the irony deepens when the families actually draw blood. Huck's casual observance turns into participation, and when he witnesses the death of his young friend, Buck, he is unable to recount the story to readers. The hated calls of "Kill them, kill them!" prompt Huck to wish that he had never gone ashore, despite his affection for the Grangerfords. The theme of death and brutality, then, is present in all facets of society, including the wealthy, and the peace of the river is never more apparent to Huck.

When Huck returns to the raft and he and Jim are safe, Huck wearily observes that "... there warn't no home like a raft, after all .... You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft." The unaffected statement solidifies

the raft/shore dichotomy and reinforces the idea that society, despite its sophistication, is cruel and unjust.

## **Chapters 19-20**

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### **Summary**

After two or three peaceful days on the raft, Huck is searching for some berries in a creek when he comes upon two desperate men. The men are obviously being chased, and Huck tells them how to lose the dogs, and they escape. The men, one around 70 and the other around 30 years old, join Huck and Jim on the raft.

Each man quickly discovers that they both are con artists, and they decide to work together. Shortly after their agreement, the youngest breaks into tears and claims that he is the Duke of Bridgewater and must be treated with respect. After a thoughtful moment, the oldest uses the same tactic and claims to be the Dauphin, the rightful heir to the French throne. Huck believes the men are simple con men but decides not to challenge them in order to keep the peace.

The duke and the king begin scheming, and with new plans, they land the raft below the one-horse town of Pokeville, which is practically deserted because of a nearby camp meeting. When the duke heads off to find a printing shop, the king decides to attend the meeting. At the meeting, the townspeople sing hymns and go up to the pulpit for forgiveness. The king joins the festivities and professes to be an old pirate who has reformed and seen the errors of his past. He burst into tears and passes around his hat and collects \$87 dollars and a jug of whisky.

When they return to the raft, Huck and Jim find that the duke has printed a handbill that describes Jim as a runaway slave from New Orleans. The handbill, the duke argues, will allow them to run the raft during the day without intrusion. The next morning, Jim says he can abide one or two kings but no more than that.

### **Analysis**

Chapter 19 continues to outline the carefree and unaffected environment aboard the raft. The days pass "smooth and lovely," and Twain uses the opportunity to portray the beauty of the Mississippi and its natural surroundings. During this time, Huck's narrative is filled with calm images of approaching dawn, small breezes, hot breakfasts, and a sky "speckled with stars."

The peaceful environment of the raft is shattered by the arrival of the duke and the king. At this point, the raft, which has been a kind of sanctuary, is invaded by society. The two men symbolize the stark contrast of the river to the

shore and once again outline the raft/shore dichotomy. In a larger sense, the duke and the king represent the confidence men that roamed both the urban and rural landscape of nineteenth-century America, always attempting to prey on the gullible and naive. The confidence man of early frontier literature used not only society's vices but also its convictions and trust to employ his schemes, and the duke and the king exemplify the trickster who takes advantage of an ignorant society.

At first, the men appear harmless, and Huck quietly rejects their preposterous claims of royalty. Huck's gesture of kindness is similar to his compassion for the doomed men aboard the *Walter Scott*, but he quickly realizes the danger that the frauds present. His recognition of their true character is important, for he understands that the two pose a particular threat to Jim. Huck's insight, however, is not surprising, for the men are simply exaggerations of the characters that Huck and Jim have already encountered during their journey. Huck has learned that society is not to be trusted, and the duke and the king quickly show that his concern is legitimate.

The inclusion of the camp meeting is a perfect example of the confidence man. Along with its playful burlesque of religion, the camp meeting shows a gullible audience that is swindled because of its faith. The ensuing scene is reminiscent of George Washington Harris' "Sut Lovingood's Lizards" and Johnson J. Hooper's "Simon Suggs Attends a Camp Meeting." Both authors were influential for Twain and reflect a society that is scammed because of its misplaced faith or hypocrisy.

## Chapters 21-23

### Summary

Preparing for their next scam, the duke and king practice the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet* and the sword fight from *Richard III*. As an encore, the duke also teaches the king a jumbled version of Hamlet's soliloquy. A few days later, they go ashore in Arkansas and decide to display their knowledge of Shakespeare. The town is a squalid place with streets of mud and loafers spitting tobacco. As Huck explores, a drunken man named Boggs races into town vowing to kill a man named Colonel Sherburn. The local townspeople laugh at Boggs and remark that his behavior is common practice, and he is harmless. After a brief period, Sherburn comes out of his office and tells Boggs to stop speaking out against him. Boggs continues to swear at Sherburn, and, in retaliation, Sherburn levels a pistol and kills him.

The town immediately decides that Sherburn must be lynched, and they storm to his house in an angry mob. When they arrive, Sherburn greets them from the roof of his porch and stands up to the mob. The crowd quickly

disperses after Sherburn calls them cowards and declares they do not have the "grit enough" to confront a real man.

After the Shakespearean Revival fails to bring in any significant money, the duke and king advertise a show where no women and children are allowed. Unable to resist, several men show up for the first show to find the king on stage, naked and painted with colorful stripes. The men soon realize they have been scammed, but instead of revealing their ignorance to the rest of the town, they convince the other townsmen to attend the show. After two successive scams, the townsmen arrive at the third show with plans to tar and feather the duke and king. While the men prepare to barrage the stage with rotten vegetables, the duke sneaks out with Huck, and they join the king and Jim and leave the town.

### **Analysis**

As with the satire of the camp meeting, the parody of Shakespeare is another staple of frontier humor that Twain uses for comic effect. The duke's version includes a mixture of Hamlet and Macbeth, and the resulting soliloquy contains misplaced phrases such as "To be, or not to be; that is the bare bodkin."

The irony of the two frauds attempting to quote Shakespeare is surpassed only by the irony of their attempt to present it to the small Arkansas village. Huck's description of the barren town and its inhabitants reminds readers of the squalid and cruel nature of society. The men are not only cruel to defenseless animals, they are also vicious with one another as is revealed in the death of poor Boggs. Similar to Twain's use of the Mississippi, the murder of Boggs is based on a real event that Twain witnessed as a young man. The incident illustrates the dangers of pride and a mob mentality, and also symbolizes human's contempt for one another. The fact that Boggs' earlier actions are deemed harmless further illustrates that no one in Huck's world is immune from corruption and hatred.

The cruelty of the Boggs episode is easily recognized by Huck, as is the general squalor of the town. Huck's reaction is noteworthy, for it contrasts sharply with the "evils" of his companion, Jim. Among the string of characters that Huck encounters - from Pap to the Grangerfords to Sherburn - Jim stands above them despite society's condemnation. Huck's inability to transcend his environment and give way to his instincts forces him to struggle with Jim's plight. Even in comparison to the disorder and injustice of the towns and their inhabitants, Huck still cannot reconcile his abolitionist actions and Jim's freedom. Huck's character further matures as he watches Jim mourn for his wife and children because he misses them. Huck observes that blacks possibly love their families as much as whites love theirs. Huck's observation



underscores the depth of ignorance and bigotry exhibited in a society that does not believe blacks to be as capable of strong emotions as whites.

The King's Campelopard and the Royal Nonesuch are based upon degrading and bawdy humor, and thus they are appropriate for the townsmen. As mentioned earlier, the strategy of the confidence man is to play upon the virtues and vices of society. By appealing to the base nature of the men, the duke and the king are able to lure them into their scam and then escape before retaliation.

## Chapter 24

### Summary

The next day, the duke paints Jim's face solid blue so they can navigate the river during the day. To complete the disguise, the duke posts a sign on the raft reading "Sick Arab-but harmless when not out of his head."

The two con men decide to scout the surrounding towns, and while the king and Huck are heading to the steamboat, they pick up a young boy in their canoe. The king questions the talkative boy thoroughly about the town and discovers a local man, Peter Wilks, has just died and left all his fortune to his English brothers.

After learning the details of the Wilks family and its friends, the king sends Huck to fetch the duke, and the con men pose as Peter Wilks' English brothers, Harvey and William. They enter the town and begin to cry and moan when they hear of their "brothers" death. The cruel approach of the scam surprises even Huck, and he comments that "it was enough to make a body ashamed of the human race."

### Analysis

The events of Chapter 24 reveal that the duke and the king have taken complete control of the raft and its travelers. The fact that the duke unties Jim and uses a disguise to give him freedom during the day is overshadowed by the latest ploy to inherit a dead man's fortune.

Similar to their earlier methods that played off of faith and conviction, the duke and the king plot to earn the confidence of an entire town. The task becomes ludicrous when readers realize that the duke and king must convince everyone of their English heritage and that William (the duke) is "deaf and dumb." The humor of the con men's upcoming scam is apparent, as is the realization that this plot is more callous than their previous pranks. Twain's burlesque on the ignorance of humankind is evident, for to succeed, the con men need a community of fools.

Huck's somber observation that "it was enough to make a body ashamed of the human race" alerts readers that he has again been forced to evaluate his

society. Whereas earlier events took place with little judgment, the Wilks scam, coupled with the death of Buck Grangerford, forces Huck to condemn the entire race. The statement underscores Huck's constant struggle.

## Chapters 25-26

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### Summary

The king and the duke put on a dramatic display and convince the family and most of the town that they are, indeed, Wilks' brothers. Sobbing, they greet Peter Wilks' daughters as their nieces and cry over the coffin. The king gives a speech that, according to Huck, is "all full of tears and flapdoodle."

Peter Wilks' will gives all of his possessions to his brothers and divides \$6,000 in gold among the daughters and Harvey and William. In order to cement the confidence of the town, the duke and the king offer their portion of gold to the daughters, and the king invites everyone to Peter's funeral "orgies." The misuse of "obsequies" confirms the suspicions of the local doctor, who laughs as he realizes the two are frauds. When the doctor tries to convince the daughters to reject the duke and the king, the daughters give the money back to prove their faith in their "uncles."

The next morning, Joanna quizzes Huck about England, the king, and church. Similar to his disguise as "Sarah Mary Williams," Huck becomes confused trying to keep up with his lies, and the trust and kindness of the daughters makes him realize that he has to act. Later that evening, Huck discovers where the duke and the king hid the gold. He takes the \$6,000 and waits for the opportunity to restore it to the rightful owners.

### Analysis

The king's "tears and flapdoodle" speech is a hilarious example of a con man at work, preying on the faith and the perceptions of conventional grief of his victims. Despite the obvious fraud recognized by readers, the family and the town easily accept the king and the duke as English. Huck is appalled by the act, but he also recognizes the persuasive power of "soul-butter" (flattery) and its effect on the ignorant townspeople. The humor increases when the king confuses "orgies" with funeral "obsequies," and his explanation of the Greek and Hebrew origins of the word only adds to the ridiculousness of the scene. In a sense, Twain is commenting on humankind's capacity for ignorance, for everyone except the doctor falls victim to the scam.

After viewing the king's speech, Huck realizes how clever, and thus how dangerous, the duke and the king actually are. To act against them clearly jeopardizes his own well being, but, more important, it also jeopardizes the chances of freedom for Jim. Despite the danger, Huck concludes he must return the gold to the daughters.

**Summary**

The same evening, Huck sneaks downstairs to try and hide the bag of gold. The front door is locked, however, and when Huck hears Mary Jane coming, he is forced to hide the gold in Peter Wilks' coffin. Because so many people are in the house, Huck does not have the opportunity to retrieve the money.

The funeral proceeds, and Huck realizes he does not know whether the gold is still in the coffin or if someone else has discovered it. After the funeral, the king announces that the estate will be sold in two days. The daughters appear to accept the sale until the king breaks up a slave family and sells them to different traders.

Mary Jane cannot bear to think of the separated family and the mother and the children never seeing one another again. Because he wants to comfort her, Huck blurts out that the slave family will see each other in the next two weeks. When Mary Jane promises to leave the house if Huck will tell her how he knows this, Huck tells the entire story of the king and the duke and how they have fooled everyone.

Mary Jane wants to tar and feather the con men immediately, but Huck reminds her of her promise and explains that "I'd be all right; but there'd be another person that you don't know about who'd be in big trouble." She honors her promise, and Huck gives her a note that explains where the missing gold can be found. The other daughters are confused about Mary Jane's absence, and the confusion grows when two more men arrive claiming to be Harvey and William.

**Analysis**

In Chapter 27, Twain extends his satire to the pomp and circumstance surrounding the funeral service of Peter Wilks. The dark humor of the funeral scene is evident with the actions of the undertaker and the comical interlude of the dog and the rat. When the service is interrupted by the noise of the dog, the undertaker solves the disturbance and then proceeds to tell the mourners that "He had a rat!" Huck's following comment that "there warn't no more popular man in town than what that undertaker was" is yet another satiric barb directed at the subject of death.

In contrast to the burlesque humor of the funeral and its concerned mourners, Chapter 28 serves to establish Mary Jane's sense of compassion, an important example for Huck to follow. In witnessing her reaction to the plight of the slave family, Huck learns another valuable lesson about the humanity of slaves and their close familial bonds. The scene provokes memories of Jim's

own claim that he will steal his children out of slavery in order to preserve his family. More important, the scene forces Huck to act based on both his instincts and his conscience. Not only will he tell the daughters where to find the gold, he will also tell them of the entire scam so that the slave family will not be separated.

Huck's decision to help the daughters should not be overlooked. To this point, Huck has generally aligned himself with tricksters and con men; he displays, after all, all of the huckster qualities that the duke and the king use. When the duke and king dupe the people of Bricksville, Huck feels no remorse because the town is morally void and generally squalid. When the duke and the king con the Wilks daughters, however, Huck is outraged and realizes he must intervene, regardless of the consequences.

One of the more powerful human statements is the act of sacrifice, and Huck's resolve to help the daughters illustrates the change that has come over his character. His decision to act foreshadows the novel's climatic moment in Chapter 31.

## **Chapters 29-30**

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### **Summary**

Even Huck recognizes that the new claimants to Peter Wilks' fortune appear to be English compared to the duke and the king. The older gentleman introduces himself as Harvey and says they can prove their identity when they retrieve their baggage. In response, the king laughs and tells the crowd it is not surprising that the new "brothers" cannot immediately prove their claim. At this point, the crowd still believes the duke and the king are the true brothers, but the doctor convinces everyone that they must investigate further. After questioning Huck about his English heritage, the town lawyer, Levi Bell, tells Huck that he obviously is not used to lying.

The older gentleman says he can prove who he is because he knows what is tattooed on Peter Wilks' chest. The king says it is a small blue arrow, and the older gentleman says it is a dim "P" and "B." The lawyer decides the only one way to be positive is to exhume Peter Wilks and have a look at his chest.

When they open the coffin, they discover the bag of gold on the body's chest. The crowd becomes so excited that Huck is able to slip away, and he and Jim escape on the raft. Before they can get very far, however, they see the king and duke have also escaped. Jim and Huck realize they are not free from the con men. The duke and the king blame one another for stealing the bag of gold, but after getting drunk, they again become comrades and start working their schemes on new villages.

## Analysis

The introduction of the new Harvey and William adds another element of hilarity to the con men's inheritance scam. The contrast between the two sets of "brothers" is obvious, and the ensuing investigation underscores both the ignorance of the town and the eagerness of the townspeople to witness a dispute. Instead of reacting with anger, the town enjoys the added confusion and as the questions continue, the humor and suspense build.

Huck's role as a servant is called into question, and unlike previous escapades, Huck is unable to convince the doctor and lawyer of his English ancestry. Instead of accepting Huck's story, the lawyer tells Huck, "I wouldn't strain myself if I was you. I reckon you ain't used to lying . . . You do it pretty awkward." Although Huck's entire journey has been based on lies and deception, he is unable to fool intelligent men for even a moment. The irony is apparent, as is Huck's reluctance to try and adapt his story. Instead of attempting to lie his way out of another predicament, Huck chooses to remain quiet and observe the comical investigation.

The con men's unwillingness to leave without selling all of the family's possessions represents the greed of the two men. Ironically, it is this same type of greed that allows Huck and the duke and the king to escape. When the townsmen see the gold in Peter Wilks' coffin, they are unable to resist and the ensuing melee is reminiscent of Bricksville. Twain's commentary on the greed and ignorance of the mob mentality is solidified with the duke and the king's escape.

## Chapter 31

### Summary

With the temperature rising and the landscape scattered with Spanish moss, Huck realizes that they are a long way from home. The new schemes of the duke and the king barely bring in enough money for liquor, so the two men begin to plot and whisper about their next scam. Huck and Jim are concerned about the clandestine behavior of the con men, and when Huck finally sees a chance to escape, he discovers that the duke and the king have made a fake handbill and turned in Jim for a \$40 reward.

Huck is furious with the con men because "after all we'd done for them scoundrels .... they could have the heart to serve Jim and make him a slave again all his life." As Huck ponders his choices, his conscience begins to trouble him again. He cannot help but feel guilty for assisting Jim, despite the fact that his instincts constantly force him into that role. After trying to pray for resolution, Huck writes a letter to Miss Watson detailing where Jim is and



signs it "Huck Finn." After he finishes the letter, he feels momentary relief and is confident that he has saved himself from going to hell for helping a slave.

Instead of being satisfied with his decision, however, Huck begins to replay their trip down the river. He reminisces about the two of them "a-floating along, talking and singing and laughing" and cannot force himself to see Jim as someone disgraceful. Huck trembles as he again picks up Miss Watson's letter and realizes that the struggle must stop: He must decide forever between two things: heaven and hell. He pauses for a minute, then declares "All right, then, I'll go to hell" and tears the letter to pieces. Once Huck makes his decision to betray society for Jim, he immediately plots to steal Jim back out of slavery.

### **Analysis**

If Chapter 18 is the end of the first segment of the novel, Chapter 31 is the end of the second segment and one of the most important chapters in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Up until this point, the novel has wavered back and forth between the river and the shore, with humorous and cruel events constantly bombarding the reader. The conflicts of individual versus society, freedom versus civilization, and sentimentalism versus realism, as well as Huck's struggle between right and wrong, are all revealed in Huck and Jim's journey. And all come to a head in Huck's eventual decision. In the midst of these events rests Huck's inner struggle to ignore his conscience and transcend his environment.

The catalyst for Huck's action is the sale of Jim back into slavery. Ironically, Huck believes he will be shunned by his community and doom himself to literal hell if he aids Jim. Despite this realization, Huck's proclamation "All right, then, I'll go to hell," ends his struggle in a concise and powerful moment, which is the climax of the novel.

In light of his climatic decision, Huck's entire narrative symbolizes a search for his own conscience and identity, and this identity is shaped by his attempt to make moral evaluations despite the pressures of surrounding theological and societal codes. That Huck has not been able to reconcile his struggle should not come as a surprise to readers, for Huck's sacrifice is lost on the racist society that pervaded nineteenth-century America. The statement becomes even more powerful when readers realize that Huck's decision to recognize Jim's humanity is not shared by the rest of society.

Above all, it is important to note that Huck's declaration, despite the surrounding satire and bitter irony, elevates him to a heroic character. Twain, however, cannot help but infuse more subtle irony even after Huck's decision, and Huck's reasoning that "as long as I was in [hell], and in for good, I might as



well go the whole hog" notifies readers that the novel will take yet another turn in its last segment.

*The Adventures of  
Huckleberry Finn  
(Mark Twain)*

## Chapters 32-33

### Summary

After learning of Jim's location, Huck arrives at the Phelps farm. He surmises the Phelps' "little one-horse cotton plantation," but before he can reach the door, he is surrounded by all sorts of barking dogs. After a slave woman runs them off, another woman comes out of the house and says, "It's you, at last! - ain't it?" as if she is expecting Huck. Before Huck realizes what he is doing, he answers yes and the woman grabs him and hugs him like she has known him all of her life.

The woman, who Huck learns is named "Aunt Sally," asks him about his trip and then asks him about the family. Huck realizes he is in a bind, but just before Huck confesses, the husband arrives and Aunt Sally introduces Huck as none other than Tom Sawyer. Huck is stunned momentarily and then realizes that he has somehow managed to stumble upon Tom's relatives. After answering several questions about the Sawyer family, Huck heads back to the river in hopes of finding the real Tom who must be on his way.

When Huck gets halfway to town, he finds Tom Sawyer. At first, Tom thinks Huck is a ghost. After Huck explains the situation with Jim, Tom declares that he will "help you steal him" out of slavery.

When they arrive at the Phelps farm, Tom makes up an elaborate story and introduces himself as Tom's brother, Sid Sawyer. Huck and Tom learn that the king and the duke are in town to perform and that Jim has warned the townspeople that the upcoming show is a fraud. Huck and Tom sneak out to try and tell the duke and the king, but they soon come upon the chaotic mob who has already tarred and feathered the con men.

### Analysis

Chapter 32 begins what could be called the last segment of the novel. Huck's solemn narration is evident at the beginning of the chapter, when he describes the breeze that occasionally washes over the farm. For Huck, the breeze comes across as a whisper of spirits long dead, and readers are reminded of those that have already died earlier in the novel. The entire journey appears to weigh heavily on Huck, and at one point he "wished I was dead" after hearing the lonesome hum of a spinning wheel. In a sense, the Phelps farm is symbolic of Huck's return back to civilization. Although he and Jim have traveled hundreds of miles down the Mississippi River, they find themselves in a situation very similar to the life they left with Miss Watson and the Widow Douglas.

Huck's climatic decision to free Jim has brought about an unconscious epiphany or revelation in Huck's character, and when he nears the farmhouse, he does not pause, but looks to "Providence to put the right words in my mouth." Although Huck has always been prone to improvisation, he now credits his ability to Providence. The statement reveals that Huck, despite his own belief that he is now damned, places his fate (and Jim's) in the hands of another. Ironically, the person who arrives is the real Tom Sawyer, the nephew of Silas and Sally Phelps.

Literary critics have argued that the coincidence of Huck arriving at the Phelps farm is implausible in a "realistic" novel. It is important to remember, however, that Twain's original intentions for the novel included Tom as a main character. The first edition was entitled *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Tom Sawyer's Comrade), and therefore it is not surprising that Tom reenters the novel before its conclusion.

Tom's arrival on the Phelps farm signals that a new leader will control the future of Huck and Jim. Whereas Huck and Jim shared responsibility for their fate, Tom now dictates their plans of "adventure" and escape. By allowing Tom to control the conclusion of the novel, *Huckleberry Finn* turns away from Huck's constant struggle with his conscience and reverts back to a story intended for boys and girls. The dramatic tonal shift can be attributed to several factors, including the fact that *Huckleberry Finn* was written in three stages. But it also reflects Twain's indecision over the conclusion of the novel and how to reconcile his scathing social commentary on American, and especially Southern, society.

Tom's reintroduction signals that playful and harmless pranks are soon to follow. The reunion of the two boys, however, does not completely overshadow the violent setting that Twain has carefully constructed. Huck still observes the squalid nature of "civilization" and tries to compensate through kindness, a trait reminiscent of the Widow Douglas. The tarring and feathering of the duke and the king reveals Huck's sympathetic view toward everyone, even those who have been cruel to him. Instead of standing by and watching the two con men receive their punishment, Huck tries to save the duke and the king from the town and a fate that could include death. When he fails to save the duke and the king, he comments that "Human beings can be awful cruel to one another." The statement could be applied to the entire novel, as Huck has witnessed countless incidents that were void of humanity.

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## Chapters 34-35

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### Summary

Tom discovers that Jim is being held in a small farm cabin, and the two boys discuss plans to free Jim from captivity. Huck's logical plan is to steal the

keys from Uncle Silas, quickly unlock Jim, and immediately leave on the raft. Tom argues that the plan is too simple and as “mild as goosemilk.” After they examine the cabin where Jim is being held, Huck suggests that they tear off one board for Jim to escape. Tom again argues that the plan is not complicated enough and then decides that they should dig Jim out because doing so will take a couple of weeks. When a slave brings food to Jim, the boys go along and whisper to Jim that they are going to set him free.

Tom and Huck begin making plans for an elaborate escape, and each step becomes more complicated and time-consuming. Tom argues that Jim will need a rope ladder and other items such as case-knives and a journal, because the escape must be done just like the prison novels he has read.

### **Analysis**

The opportunity to burlesque Tom’s romanticism and infuse humor back into the novel comes at the price of Jim’s perceived freedom. In actuality, Jim has already been set free by the late Miss Watson’s will, and readers will learn this startling fact at the end of the novel. However, because both Huck and Jim are unaware of Jim’s freedom, they agree to follow Tom’s extravagant plans for a dramatic escape.

The elaborate escape plan provides Tom the opportunity to call upon several of the prison stories and adventure novels he has read. By combining unnecessary tactics such as a tunnel and devices such as a rope ladder, the entire plan becomes a comical romantic farce. The incongruity of Huck’s logic in the face of Tom’s imagination creates several humorous exchanges, and the farce is reminiscent of Twain’s earlier work with Tom Sawyer. For example, when Tom says that Jim needs to keep a journal, Huck replies, “Journal your granny - Jim can’t write.”

Huck’s practical response is both humorous and revealing at the same time. On the surface, it is obvious that Jim does not need to keep a journal, but the fact that Jim is captive during this time is an overriding shadow on the slapstick humor. The ability to read and write was not common among anyone in the mid-1800s, and because Jim is a slave, his being able to write is much more unlikely. More important, however, is the realization that Huck cannot stop the nonsensical plans because he and Jim are trapped within the confines of a racist society.

Neither Huck nor Jim is able to dissuade or alter Tom’s plans except in minor ways, and their failed attempts symbolize their ill-fated efforts to truly escape civilization’s conventions. The biting satire is obvious when Huck wonders about the logic of digging a tunnel with ordinary case-knives. When he questions Tom, Tom replies that “It don’t make no difference how foolish it is, it’s the right way . . . . And there ain’t no other way, that ever I heard of, and I’ve

read all the books that gives any information about these things.” As a representative of proper society, Tom summarizes civilization’s reliance on tradition and existing laws that have been recorded, despite their lack of humanity and compassion.

## **Chapters 36-38**

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### **Summary**

The next evening, Tom and Huck try to use the case-knives to dig a tunnel under the cabin, but after a few hours, they realize they need better tools. Tom decides they will use pick-axes and shovels and pretend that they are case-knives. The next night, Tom and Huck easily dig into Jim’s cabin and wake him. Jim listens to Tom’s plans and agrees to go along with them even though he thinks they do not make sense. Tom assures Jim that they will change the plans immediately if something goes wrong.

The boys begin smuggling “escape” tools into the cabin, and Aunt Sally notices that items are missing from the house. To confuse her, Tom and Huck continually take and replace sheets and spoons until Aunt Sally does not know how many she had to start with. Finally they tear up one of the sheets and smuggle it into Jim’s cabin along with some tins plates. Following Tom’s instructions on how to write mysterious messages, Jim marks on the tin plates and then throws them out the window.

The next day, Tom continues to find new distractions for Jim’s escape. Tom writes down some inscriptions for Jim to carve into the wall but then realizes the walls are wooden. To be done properly and according to the books, Tom says they must have stone. The boys try to roll a large grindstone into the cabin but are not strong enough. Jim climbs out of the cabin and helps them roll the stone the rest of the way. Despite Jim’s protests, Tom decides that the cabin needs other residents, including spiders and snakes, in order to make it a proper dungeon and Jim a proper prisoner.

### **Analysis**

In Chapters 36 through 38, the novel slips further into the farce as neither Huck nor Jim understand why they must perform all of these ludicrous acts before Jim can escape. Ironically, Huck and Jim view Tom as a representative of society and education, and because of this, they feel that Tom must know the best way for them to escape.

Jim’s continued enslavement is both absurd and grotesque and is a harsh comment on the racial condition of post-Civil War America. As mentioned earlier, Miss Watson has already set Jim free in her will, but the ability to transcend and change society’s perception is not as easily accomplished. Jim,

therefore, remains captive to others despite the fact that he has, indeed, been freed.

It is important to remember that *Huck Finn* was written in the 20 years following the Civil War, and the entire novel reflects Twain's own post-Civil War observations. Although the Union made some attempt at Southern reconstruction, the South quickly fell into a squalid and segregated ruin. Conditions for newly freed slaves were no doubt improved, but the longed-for freedom had not come with changed perceptions, acceptance, or equality.

## Chapters 39-40

### Summary

Tom and Huck capture several rats to put in Jim's cabin, but one of the Phelps boys finds the box and lets all of the rats free into the house. After several creatures are accidentally freed in the Phelps' house, Tom and Huck finally capture enough rats, spiders, and snakes, and put them in Jim's cabin. Jim complains that there is not enough room for him, and if he ever becomes free he "wouldn't ever be a prisoner again, not for a salary."

After three weeks, everything is finally ready for the grand escape. To finish off the scheme, Tom writes an anonymous letter to the Phelps saying that a "desperate gang of cutthroats" will attempt to steal Jim out of the cabin.

Huck returns to the house to pick up some butter and finds that the Phelps have gathered 15 men to battle the gang of cutthroats. Alarmed, Huck sneaks out the window and warns Tom that the men are here, and they must all escape immediately. When the men come to the cabin, Jim and the boys slip out of the hole and head for the river amidst shouts and gunshots. They make it to the raft but then discover that Tom has been shot in the calf. Tom tells them to shove off, but Jim will not leave until a doctor has looked at Tom.

### Analysis

The entire Phelps' household is in complete disarray when the escape actually begins. In this manner, the novel has moved even further from the peaceful tranquility of the raft and the river to the chaos of society and the shore. Symbolizing the clash between Romanticism and Realism, Huck and Tom continue to display juxtaposing approaches to the escape and the situation. The arrival of a town posse frightens Huck, but Tom is delighted. When Huck tells Tom that the house is full of men with guns, Tom replies, "Ain't it bully!" as if the entire escape is a dramatic work of fiction.

Although readers have already recognized Jim as compassionate and caring, Chapter 40 reinforces Jim's qualities of bravery and loyalty. When they discover that Tom has been shot, Jim adamantly refuses to leave and says, "I



doan' budge a step out'n dis place 'dout a doctor; not if it's forty year!" The statement reinforces Jim as a heroic figure capable of sacrifice.

#### Chapters 41-42

#### Summary

Huck quickly locates a doctor and tells him that his brother "had a dream . . . and it shot him." The doctor heads for the raft but will not let Huck come along because the canoe is too small. Exhausted, Huck falls asleep until the next morning. When he wakes up, he runs into Uncle Silas, and the two of them go back to the Phelps farm, which is full of local men discussing the strange cabin and its contents. The farmers decide that Jim must have been helped by several slaves and the writing is some sort of "secret African" language.

The next day, Tom and Jim arrive at the Phelps' with the doctor and several of the farmers. Tom is on a mattress and Jim has his hands tied. The men argue whether or not to hang Jim, and the doctor explains how Jim helped with Tom instead of running away.

The next morning Tom wakes up and begins to tell Aunt Sally how he and "Tom" (Huck) orchestrated the entire escape. Tom relishes the retelling until he hears that Jim is still in captivity. Tom rises up in bed and demands that they free Jim because he has known all along that Miss Watson had died and set Jim free in her will. At that moment, Aunt Polly arrives, and Tom and Huck are forced to reveal their true identities.

#### Analysis

With Tom unable to direct the plans, Huck again takes control of the story and makes decisions based on his common sense and logic. Instead of listening to Tom's intricate plan to fetch a doctor, Huck trusts his own ability to tell lies and control the situation. Although the doctor is somewhat suspicious of Huck's story, when Huck returns to the farm, he finds that the entire community has been drawn into Tom's fanciful escape. The ignorance and gullibility of the farmers is easily seen as they try to reconstruct and understand the escape.

Jim's refusal to leave Tom in Chapter 40 becomes more significant in Chapter 42 when he allows himself to be recaptured. As with Huck's earlier decision to sacrifice his soul to free Jim, Jim sacrifices his freedom and, quite possibly, his life by staying with Tom. Because Jim is thought to be a runaway slave, the local men "was very huffy, and some of them wanted to hang Jim as an example." Jim is, no doubt, fully aware that if he is recaptured he might be lynched, and this realization gives more credence to his role as a heroic figure at the end of the novel. The doctor who saves Tom also lauds Jim's character, and this praise further establishes his position.

As mentioned earlier, one of the most controversial elements of the novel is the fact that Jim is already free during the escape. When Tom realizes that Jim has been recaptured, he sits up in bed and declares that "They hain't no right to shut him up! Shove! - and don't you lose a minute. Turn him loose! he ain't no slave; he's as free as any cretur that walks this earth!" The realization stuns both the characters of the novel and the readers, as it becomes clear that the entire escape was unnecessary.

The turn of events serves two purposes. On the surface, the realization finalizes the separate attitudes and beliefs of Tom and Huck. Tom's Romanticism is now viewed as harmful instead of playful, and his connection with society illustrates its overarching lack of compassion toward the plight of slaves in nineteenth-century America. Beneath the surface, however, is the subtle message that no one, regardless of race or social standing or location, is free from civilization and its misconceptions. Tom's statement, then, is one of "Twain's harshest and most ironic comments on the American condition.

## Chapter the Last

### Summary

Huck asks Tom what they would have done if the escape had worked, and Tom says they would have continued having adventures down to the end of the Mississippi. After they finished, they could ride back home on a steamship, in style, and they would all be heroes.

In conclusion, Huck tells readers that Tom is well now and wears his bullet around his neck on a watch-guard. He says that, if he had known how much trouble it was to write a book, he would not have tried it. Now that he is finished, he must "light out for the Territory ahead of the rest" in order to stay one step ahead of civilization and live in true freedom. Aunt Sally now wants to adopt Huck officially and "sivilize" him, but Huck says he "... can't stand it. I been there before."

### Analysis

Although Huck and Jim have both undergone changes in character, the novel returns to its beginnings at the conclusion with the Widow Douglas trying to "sivilize" Huck. The last chapter allows Twain to comment on the process of writing and the difficulty of completing *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Twain's difficulty was due, in large part, to his struggle to decide between a social commentary and a children's adventure novel. Although Huck declares that if "T'd 'a' knowed what a trouble it was to make a book I wouldn't 'a' tackled it," the suggestion is that there will be yet another adventure for Huck, and yet another novel for Twain. Always the maverick, Huck announces that he will

continue to try and avoid the trappings of civilization and seek his own freedom.

## ANSWERS

### ■ Multiple Choice Questions

1. What is the source of the fortune that Judge Thatcher is keeping in trust for Huck?  
(a) Buried treasure (b) Huck's father's life insurance policy  
(c) A robber's stash that Huck and Tom found in a cave  
(d) An inheritance from Huck's mother
2. At the end of the novel, which character informs the others that Jim is actually a free man?  
(a) Aunt Polly (b) Tom (c) Huck (d) Sid
3. Which of the following symbolizes bad luck to Huck and Jim?  
(a) A shed snakeskin (b) Jim's hairy chest  
(c) Rain (d) The wrecked steamboat
4. Which Wilks sister is initially suspicious of Huck?  
(a) Mary Jane (b) Susan  
(c) Joanna (d) Sophia
5. How does Huck know that Pap has returned to St. Petersburg?  
(a) Tom tells him  
(b) Pap visits Judge Thatcher to demand Huck's money  
(c) The authorities determine that the corpse found in the river is not Pap  
(d) He sees Pap's boot print in the snow
6. What is Jim's initial destination when he and Huck start downriver?  
(a) New Orleans (b) An Arkansas plantation  
(c) St. Louis (d) The Ohio River
7. Where does Huck hide the Wilks family gold?  
(a) In Peter Wilks's coffin (b) In the basement  
(c) In a mattress (d) In an old cabin in the woods
8. Down which river do Huck and Jim travel?  
(a) The Missouri (b) The Mississippi  
(c) The Ohio (d) The Chattahoochee
9. What event sets off the final gunfight between the Shepherdsons and the Grangerfords?  
(a) The death of Harney Shepherdson  
(b) The theft of the Grangerfords' cattle  
(c) Sophia Grangerford's elopement with a Shepherdson  
(d) An insult to Colonel Grangerford
10. How do Huck and Jim initially acquire the raft?  
(a) They steal it.  
(b) They build it.  
(c) They buy it from a slave trader.

- (d) They find it during a flood.
11. What does the "witch pie" that Huck and Tom bake for Jim contain?
- (a) A rope ladder
  - (b) A pen made from a brass candlestick
  - (c) An old shirt and a spoon
  - (d) A dead snake
12. How do the duke and the dauphin dress Jim so that he can stay on the raft without being tied up?
- (a) As a young girl
  - (b) As a sick Arab
  - (c) As a camel
  - (d) As a Shakespearean actor
13. What is the name of the town where Huck, Jim, and Tom live at the novel's opening?
- (a) Cairo
  - (b) St. Louis
  - (c) Pikesville
  - (d) St. Petersburg
14. Why does Jim run away from Miss Watson's?
- (a) She treats him poorly.
  - (b) She is planning to sell him, which would separate him from his family.
  - (c) He wants to see relatives in New Orleans.
  - (d) He wants to help Huck escape his father.
15. What charm does Jim wear around his neck that he says cures sickness?
- (a) A silver key
  - (b) A five-cent piece
  - (c) A snake tooth
  - (d) A rabbit's foot
16. Which of the following is the primary influence on Tom Sawyer?
- (a) His Aunt Polly
  - (b) Sunday school
  - (c) Adventure novels
  - (d) Abolitionist speeches
17. "Temperance" refers to the movement designed to abolish which of the following?
- (a) Drinking alcohol
  - (b) Slavery
  - (c) School segregation
  - (d) Income taxes
18. What kind of animal does Huck kill as part of the plot to fake his own death?
- (a) A dog
  - (b) A deer
  - (c) A fish
  - (d) A pig
19. Who finally tells Huck that Pap is dead?
- (a) Tom
  - (b) Aunt Polly
  - (c) Jim
  - (d) Sally Phelps
20. Which of the following characters gets shot in Jim's final "escape"?
- (a) Huck
  - (b) Tom
  - (c) Jim
  - (d) All of the above
21. Where does Huck go after Sherburn disperses the lynch mob?
- (a) To the police
  - (b) To the raft
  - (c) To the circus
  - (d) To the theater

22. What is Mark Twain's real name?  
(a) William Jennings Bryan (b) Henry Williams Norris  
(c) William Dean Howells (d) Samuel Clemens
23. How does Tom travel to the Phelps farm?  
(a) By steamboat (b) By horse-cart  
(c) By foot (d) By train
24. Where does Huck intend to go at the novel's end?  
(a) St. Petersburg (b) The West  
(c) New York City (d) The Phelps farm

■ **Short Answers Type Questions**

1. Why does Jim run away?
2. What trick does Huck play on Jim after they get separated in the fog?
3. Why does Huck write the letter to Miss Watson informing her of Jim's Whereabouts?
4. When does Jim earn his freedom?
5. Why doesn't Huck want to be adopted by Aunt Sally?
6. How do Pap Finn, the Widow Douglas, and Judge Thatcher dispute over the custody of Huck?
7. How does Huck escape from imprisonment by his father?
8. What dreams and plans does Jim have for his future once he successfully escapes from slavery?
9. What is the significance of the town of Cairo, Illinois?
10. How does Huck escape from the feud between the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons?
11. What happens after two con artists come on board Huck and Jim's raft?
12. How do the duke and king work their Royal Nonesuch scam?
13. How does Huck foil the attempts of the duke and king to rob the Wilks family?
14. Who is responsible for Jim's recapture and how does it happen?
15. Why is Jim's imprisonment on Silas Phelps's plantation a lucky coincidence for Huck and Jim?
16. How does the old lady discover that Huck is a boy?

■ **Long Answers Type Questions**

1. What does Twain accomplish by using Huck as the narrator in "*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*"?
2. Why did Tom want to go through the adventure of freeing Jim if he was already free? Was it just for the excitement and thrill? Did it have a deeper meaning? Did Tom seem to represent the South/civilization?

3. Why do Huck and Jim run away together in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*?
4. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, how would you compare and contrast life on the raft to life on shore?
5. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, why is Cairo (pronounced Cay ROW) so important to Jim?
6. What contrasts between Huck and Tom are established throughout the novel? What is the irony in Pap's fury about the educated black man?
7. What symbolized bad luck for Huck and Jim?
8. How does Jim's story about his daughter 'Lizabeth alter the way Huck thinks about Jim in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.
9. What purpose did Huck faking his own death serve in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*?
10. What is the nature and significance of the "The Royal Nonesuch" in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain and in society?
11. What happens to Huck's friend Buck Grangerford in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*?
12. Give three examples of Man vs. Society in chapters 8-11 of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.
13. In "*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*", what are some quotes showing realism?
14. Why does Huck risk punishment by helping Jim escape? What do Huck's actions reveal about his character?
15. What is the significance of the dead body in the frame house and Mary/Sarah Williams?
16. What is ironic about the notice in the beginning of "*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*?" the notice is in the beginning after the preface.
17. How does Huck grow as a person? What life lessons does he learn from his encounters on the river?
18. What is the historical context of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*?

### Answers

#### Multiple Choice Questions

- |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| 1. (c)  | 2. (b)  | 3. (a)  | 4. (c)  | 5. (d)  | 6. (d)  | 7. (a)  | 8. (b)  |
| 9. (c)  | 10. (d) | 11. (a) | 12. (b) | 13. (d) | 14. (b) | 15. (b) | 16. (c) |
| 17. (a) | 18. (d) | 19. (c) | 20. (b) | 21. (c) | 22. (d) | 23. (a) | 24. (b) |



## CHAPTER

# 6

### WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF ? (Edward Elbee)

#### Act 1 : Fun and Games : Scene I

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##### Summary and Analysis

Since *Who's Afraid of VirgiWoolf?* is a very long play with each act being rather lengthy, for the sake of critical discussion and explication, each act will be divided into scenes even though this was not done in the original play. The scenic division will follow the classic method of scene division; that is, there is a new scene with either the entrance or exit of a character from the stage. Thus, scene I comprises the entrance of George and Martha and ends with the entrance of Honey and Nick. While the language of the play might be acceptable today, in 1962 the opening language was startling, if not shocking, to the audience. The play opens with George and Martha returning home from a party at her father's house. There is a loud crash followed by Martha variously swearing, cursing, shouting ("braying" as George calls it) and insulting her husband, George. (She calls him a "cluck" and a "dumbbell" and insults him continually in other ways.) As she looks about her home, she is reminded of a line from a Bette Davis film, and the line, "What a dump," delivered in imitation of Bette Davis, has since become one of the most famous lines from the play. The movie character that Martha is quoting is "discontent," and the scene shows that Martha is also discontent with her house, with her husband who never does anything ("You never do anything; you never mix . . ."), and most importantly with her own life.

Her discontentment is important because this will be one of the reasons that the couple has created the imaginary child.

Since it is 2 a.m. and neither of them is sober, George assumes that since they are home, one small nightcap would be alright, but suddenly Martha springs the news on him that company is coming. Martha's main justification for having invited guests over is that her "daddy," who is the President of the college where George teaches, told her to be "nice" to this new couple. Martha's repetition three times about her father's instructions suggests already that her "daddy" has an influence on George and Martha's lives that will figure significantly in later scenes.

After Martha informs him who the couple is, George tells Martha that he wishes "you'd stop springing things on me all the time . . . you're always springing things on me." Beginning with this statement, we see that part of the play will deal with the concept of who is running or managing their lifestyle. During the first part of the drama, Martha seems to be in almost complete control of their lives, but a change will later occur and it will be George who will spring things on Martha.

Martha reminds George of the nursery rhyme that apparently was sung at the party at her father's house. Someone had substituted the name of the famous British novelist Virginia Woolf for the Big Bad Wolf. The mention of this nursery rhyme with its intellectual variation characterizes much of the first act with its fun and games, with the shifting from intellectual conversation to baby talk and to talk of babies (see note on the title in the preceding section).

The rest of the scene shows the extreme variance in the relationship between the two. When George fails to respond to the song, Martha will first tell him "You make me puke" and then will follow this insult by their both laughing, and her requesting more ice in her drink and wanting a "great big sloppy kiss" from George. Thus, their relationship moves from one of grand insults to one of open sexuality. We are now prepared to see both react on a variety of levels. Martha's age is also emphasized in this scene since she is six years older than George. This implies that she is, as she later says, the earth mother capable of controlling both George and men much younger than she is.

When the doorbell rings, she orders George to answer it. She forces George into the role of "houseboy" as she will later force Nick to answer the bell after he has been a failure in bed. But before George answers the doorbell, he warns Martha three times not to start in "on the bit about the kid." This ominous note creates an anticipation about the nature of "the kid" which will be resolved only in the last part of the play, and lets us know that the subject of "the kid" is one with which George and Martha are quite familiar and that it is also quite private between them.

As George is about to open the door, he says things that arouse Martha's anger to the point that she screams "screw You!" just as the door is opened so that it appears that she screams this invective at the newly arrived guests, Nick and Honey. This comment becomes the central metaphor for the rest of the drama. It becomes obvious that Martha invited Nick and Honey because she is physically attracted to Nick and constant allusions will be made about Nick's body which he keeps in good shape. The fact that she yells the comment to Nick conforms with her later attempts to seduce the young man.

Other than the term having sexual meaning, "screw" also carries a connotation of getting to someone or getting even with someone or confusing someone. Each of these meanings also applies to the play. After George has later been humiliated by Martha, he then initiates the game "Getting the Guests" in which he gets even with the guests and also gets them thoroughly confused before Nick understands the final truth about "the kid." Another meaning of screw is to tighten, to twist, to apply pressure or to coerce. George constantly applies pressure to Honey and twists her tipsy memory around to make her corroborate his story about the telegram. Then, of course, the term "to screw up" means to make a mess of things. Martha certainly did this when she revealed the "bit about the kid." In fact, by normal standards, George and Martha's lives have been all screwed up for years. Also, to be "screwed out of" means that one has been taken advantage of or cheated in some way. At one point or another in the play each character is taken advantage of by some other character. And, finally, a screw or a screwball refers to a very eccentric person. George and Martha's behavior or life style and their imaginary child could certainly be classified as eccentric or unusual behavior. Consequently, the two words hurled at George but hitting Nick and Honey become central to the rest of the drama.

## **Act 1 : Fun and Games : Scene II**

### **Summary and Analysis**

Scene II begins with the entrance of Nick and Honey and ends when Martha takes Honey to the bathroom, leaving George and Nick alone.

With the entrance of Nick and Honey, who have heard Martha scream her invective, "Screw You," Martha, Nick and Honey attempt some sort of diversionary conversations. George constantly shows his superior wit by his witty repartee. When Nick tries to make social conversation by commenting on an original oil painting, George responds that it was by "some Greek with a mustache Martha attacked one night. . . ." Thematically, this comment emphasizes Martha's aggressive nature and suggests her later attempts to seduce young Nick. The discussion shifts to a conversation about drinking, then to the remembrance of the ditty "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" and ends with the discussion of the party at Martha's father's house. All of these interchanges are characterized by some of the wittiest dialogue in modern drama. But the dramatic interest in these witticisms lies in the fact that undoubtedly Martha and George have been saying exactly the same witty things over and over, year after year to new faculty members. It is not the first time that George has described Martha's drinking habits or the nature of her mind or the basic characteristics of Martha's father's parties. Consequently, we should remember that each comment is somewhat "fed" to the newcomers and



that Martha and George are staging a "performance" for the young couple. It is important to establish that this "routine" exists in order to understand later on that the subject of their child has never been mentioned.

Just as Martha and Honey are leaving, George once again reminds Martha: "Just don't shoot your mouth off . . . about . . . you-know-what." This is another ominous warning, and we are further alerted when Martha threatens that she will "talk about any goddamn thing I want to." This now prepares the reader for the fact that when Martha does reveal something about "the kid" that drastic measures will have to be taken.

### **Act 1 : Fun and Games : Scene III**

#### **Summary and Analysis**

With the departure of Martha and Honey, we begin scene III with George and Nick who talk of George's "dashed hopes," the "musical beds" among the faculty, of their relative ages and ambitions, and of the differences between history and biology.

The conflict in this scene is between two approaches to life, epitomized by the major difference between history and biology. George accuses Nick of trying to rearrange mankind's "chromozones" (which he mistakes for chromosomes, thus showing his little knowledge about biology) and therefore to adjust the future of mankind, while Nick constantly fails to understand George's classical allusions (he does not know that "Parnassus" is the mountain where the great Greek poets and philosophers were supposed to live after death) and thus reveals that he (Nick) is not concerned with human history, and prefers the scientific approach to a humanistic approach. Early in the scene George sets up intellectual traps for Nick who falls into them; but when George calls for a response to his declension "Good, better, best, bested," Nick refuses to participate any longer in George's game. Since the title of the act is "Fun and Games" we are thus exposed to one of the themes basic to the play. Ultimately, as we will see when we learn about the imaginary child, George and Martha's entire marriage has been a type of "fun and games," deception and illusion. Their bantering and hurling of insults throughout this first act is also a type of game. If one were to read Eric Berne's *Games People Play* (1964), one would discover that games can become various types of substitutes for real emotions. The titles of other games played later in the drama include "Humiliate the Host," "Hump the Hostess," "Get the Guest," "Bringing Up Baby," "Peel the Label," "Houseboy," and "Kill the Kid." Each game will be seen to function on its own level. And as with all games, there are certain rules that must be observed. When Martha violates the rules of their game, George must, at the

end of the drama, bring the game to an end and in such a way that the guests will never reveal the existence of the game to anyone.

When Nick refuses to play the game and threatens to leave immediately, George refuses to let him go because, by this time, George is aware that maybe Nick does have some ability to play in the various games - that suddenly Nick exhibits some liveliness that wasn't apparent before. Thus by persuading Nick to stay, the games will continue for a while longer. George emphasizes that it is only a game by assuring Nick that Martha and he are not having an argument - instead, they are merely "... exercising ... we're merely walking what's left of our wits." In actual life, this is another key to George and Martha's personal relationship: they enjoy witty repartee and a love/hate relationship that is expressed through their verbal violence. Ultimately it is amazing how much hostility and hatred they can throw at each other only to turn immediately to each other for emotional support.

This scene closes with the allusion to another game - or the same one. When Nick asks George if he has any children, George answers with a juvenile reply: "That's for me to know and you to find out" - a type of retort that is common among young children. The emphasis on childbearing is carried further when George inquires, in turn, about Nick's plans for a family, preparing us later for the revelation about Honey's alleged pregnancy.

When Nick implies that he might want to settle in this college town, George calls the place "Illyria ... Penguin Island ... Gomorrah. ... You think you're going to be happy here in New Carthage, eh?" These allusions have varying significance. Illyria was the idealized seacoast in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*; Penguin Island is both an illusionary and realistic satire on civilization; Gomorrah was the most sinful city in the Old Testament and was completely destroyed by God because of the lustfulness of its people; and Carthage was the scene of the greatest of the "unholy love affairs" of ancient times - that of Dido and Aeneas. Thus each is, in some way, a reflection of various aspects of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

## **Act 1 : Fun and Games : Scene IV**

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### **Summary and Analysis**

Scene IV is very short. Honey returns to tell the others that Martha is changing so as to be more comfortable. Honey wants to know more about George and Martha's twenty-one-year-old son, and George is stunned to hear this news and threatens to get even with Martha in some way.

While this scene is very short, it is also a turning point in the drama. George is aware, first, that if Martha is changing clothes, she is changing for the hunt, for the kill, the seduction. As George tells the young couple, "Martha

hasn't changed for me in years" meaning not that she has not changed her clothes, but her basic lifestyle. Only at the end of the drama will Martha have to face the fact that she must change - she can no longer live as she has.

When George hears that Martha has mentioned their "son," he wheels around "as if struck from behind." His insistence upon hearing it again as though he were "nailing it down" (stage directions) indicates clearly that this is the first time that the son has been mentioned in front of others. His first reaction is an ominous warning with threatening overtones. The fact that an outsider now knows about this means that George cannot allow them to leave with the knowledge of their imaginary son - that he must keep the guests in his house until he can discover what to do.

### **Act 1 : Fun and Games : Scene V**

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#### **Summary and Analysis**

Martha returns in a "most voluptuous" dress and begins to openly admire Nick's body and to discuss it, and at the same time, to ridicule both George's position in the college and his physique. When Martha is about to begin on a boxing story after finding out that Nick was a boxer, George leaves.

Other than the wit involved, this scene mainly shows Martha as an aggressive, seductive female, who is also enjoying playing some type of game. She varies at one moment from baby talk to vituperative language. She cuddles up to George and then throws him off balance with her insults. She belittles his position in the History Department as well as his physical abilities. Then turning from George, she openly admires Nick's fine body and there "is a rapport of some unformed sort established" between them - a rapport filled with double meanings. At this point and for some time to come, Martha has the upper hand over George: it will not be until much later in the drama that George will again gain control of the situation.

### **Act 1 : Fun and Games : Scene VI**

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#### **Summary and Analysis**

This very short scene involves Martha's narrating a story about how at the beginning of World War II, her father wanted everyone in good physical condition, so one day when people had boxing gloves on, she put on a pair and accidentally knocked George into a huckleberry bush.

The actual boxing scene between George and Martha corresponds to their constant verbal sparring. As with the first act of the drama, Martha wins the first round of the boxing match, but George will be the ultimate victor in the final contest. As Martha relates the story, she tells the young people that "It

*Who's Afraid of Virginia  
Woolf?*  
(Edward Elbee)



was funny, but it was awful." This phrase characterizes her attitude about their entire marital relationship.

## **Act 1 : Fun and Games : Scenes VII-IX**

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### **Summary and Analysis**

These two short scenes begin with George continuing with the fun and games. He returns with the fake gun and pretends that he is going to shoot Martha. Since the arguments between George and Martha have been so vituperative and seemingly bitter, Nick and Honey are horrified. (In some productions, the gun explodes with an American flag rather than a Chinese parasol. While the American flag emphasizes rather lamely the underlying parody of American life and values, the Chinese parasol carries through more aptly the idea of the fun and games.) Furthermore, the gun is an obvious sexual symbol which delights Martha's sensuous self. In the same scene, she refers to George as "You . . . prick." At the end of the scene, she delights in using double meanings when she tells Nick that she bets he won't need a fake gun, or any other "props."

When Martha finds out that Nick is not in math but in biology, she continues her vulgar suggestiveness by maintaining that biology is closer "to the meat of things."

Scene IX opens with Martha telling Nick as he re-enters: "You're right at the meat of things, baby" a phrase she repeats until George tells her that she is obsessed with it. There is then the discussion, begun earlier in the third scene, concerning the sciences and the humanities. During this scene, as biological matters are discussed and as Martha becomes more and more attracted to young Nick, she increasingly degrades George. In a type of discussion reminiscent of science fiction, George defends the "glorious variety and unpredictability" of the human race against the scientist's idea of creating test-tube babies according to a certain pattern. George, the intellectual humanist, argues for "surprise, the multiplexity" found in natural birth. Nick, the scientist, stands for the creation of a "civilization of men, smooth, blond, and right at the middleweight limit." George's stand against Nick can also be seen as a defense against all the forces which are threatening the "sanctity" of his home.

As George defends the rights of humans, the subject of his "son" is brought up by Honey. At first, the imaginary son is referred to as an "it" which is quite appropriate. George, however, is the one who insists that Martha tell about their son because she is the one who brought it (him) up. And the subject of the son becomes the *raison d'être* for the remainder of the play: that is, George

must "get the guests" in order to preserve the sanctity of the hearth. The scene ends with George going to get more booze.

*Who's Afraid of Virginia  
Woolf?*  
(Edward Elbee)

## **Act 1 : Fun and Games : Scenes X-XI**

### **Summary and Analysis**

In George's absence, Martha tells her guests (and thus the audience) how she met and married George. Earlier she had married a young gardener at a finishing school, but her father annulled the marriage immediately. Then she decided to marry someone in the college and "along came George" who in fact returns at this moment "bearing hooch." At first, George goes along with Martha's story, thinking that it concerns their courtship. When he realizes otherwise, he warns her to stop because he now sees that she is leading up to telling about his failures. He reminds her that she has already spilled the beans about their son and now, he says, "if you start in on this other business, I warn you, Martha, it's going to make me angry." Even though he warns her again and again, she continues with the story of his failures.

She tells how it was assumed that George would be groomed to take over her father's place someday. But George wasn't ambitious - in fact he was "... a FLOP! A great ... big ... fat ... FLOP!" At this point, George breaks a bottle on the portable bar, but Martha continues even though George is at the breaking point himself. As Martha continues her vicious recounting of George's failures and ineptitudes, he begins to sing "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" and is joined by the drunken Honey, who becomes sick and rushes down the hall to vomit. Nick and Martha follow her, leaving the crushed and semi-tragic figure of George standing entirely alone. George is at the depth of his existence now with his life laid bare. We have now finished the game of "Humiliating the Host." For the moment Martha has triumphed and George is defeated.

## **Act II : Walpurgisnacht : Scenes I-III**

### **Summary and Analysis**

The subject matter of scenes I-III concerns George's and Nick's views of their respective wives and other matters. It is briefly interrupted (less than a page) by Martha's appearance to report on the state of Honey's relative sobriety or drunkenness; otherwise, without this brief interruption, this should be considered thematically as one scene.

Act II begins with Nick reporting that Honey is "all right." George then inquires about Martha. In a comic interchange, there is a confusion (deliberate on George's part) as to which wife is being talked about. The confusion begins logically when George asks Nick about the whereabouts of Martha. Nick answers that "she's making coffee" and then in the same sentence says that

"She [meaning Honey] gets sick often." George, preoccupied with Martha, takes this opportunity to deliberately misunderstand Nick and therefore puts Nick on the defensive. Because Nick has just witnessed George's humiliation, George wants to make Nick uncomfortable. The hostility between the two men increases as each expresses his antagonism by attacking the other's wife. Nick refers to Martha's and George's abilities to flagellate each other as being very impressive. George retaliates by referring to Honey's tendency to "throw up a lot."

Suddenly there is a startling switch from hostility to confidentiality as the two men begin to reveal things about their respective wives. If we remember, as Nick will later point out, that they have been drinking since 9 p.m. and it is now in the early hours of the morning, then we realize that in such a drunken state, there can easily be a switch from hostility to congenial confidences.

In the course of the conversation, Nick reveals that he married Honey because she thought she was pregnant. It turned out, however, to have been a hysterical pregnancy: "She blew up and then she went down"; that is, she had all the symptoms of pregnancy without actually being pregnant and while she was in this state, they were married. Later on, however, we discover that it was not a forced marriage - there had been many other factors influencing the marriage: they had known each other since early childhood, it was assumed by both families that they would marry, Honey's father had a great deal of money, and they did care for each other very much.

George then confides in Nick by telling a story about a boy who accidentally shot his mother and sometime later this boy was in a bar and ordered a "bergin and water," which caused the entire bar to begin laughing and ordering the same. Later the boy was driving a car with "his learner's permit in his pocket" and swerved to "avoid a porcupine and drove straight into a large tree" and killed his father. The boy had to be put into an asylum - "That was thirty years ago."

George's story of the boy who had accidentally shot his mother and then killed his father in an auto accident will be repeated twice again in the drama - it is the subject of George's novel which Martha's father refuses to allow George to publish and it is also the basis for the story of the death of George and Martha's imaginary child. Since the "narrated events" about this boy occurred about thirty years ago (at which time George would have been about sixteen, near the age of the "fictional" boy) and since the same is the subject of his first novel (most first novels are often thinly disguised autobiographies) we can assume that these events possibly happened to George himself. If so, we can use these events to explain George's silence (his refusal to publish), his general withdrawal from life, and his preference for an imaginary child - one who can't

kill his parents - to a real child. We could further suggest that George tolerates Martha's disparagement of him because he feels he deserves it.

After the confidential talk, the conversation returns to the two wives. After George has mentioned again Honey's imaginary pregnancy, George casually asserts that "Martha doesn't have pregnancies at all." This statement should alert us (or Nick) that their son is an imaginary one. Yet, continuing in the line of "Fun and Games," George refers to their son as a "bean bag" - a type of object children play with and thus it is an appropriate label for an imaginary child.

After a brief interruption by Martha (scene II) which includes their hurling obscene French words at each other, George discovers that Nick does have very ambitious plans about "taking over" matters at the university and one way might be for Nick to start sleeping around with certain influential wives. At first, this was part of the "fun and games," but suddenly both George and Nick realize the seriousness of the idea and it frightens Nick more than George. George honestly tries to warn Nick that there is "quicksand here" and that Nick will "be dragged down, just as . . ." but he does not finish his sentence, which implies that George knows that he has been dragged down. Nick refuses to listen and responds with a vicious "UP YOURS!" which prompts George to make an absurd speech about a civilization based on moral principles being reduced to "UP YOURS." After this absurd speech, applauded by Nick, Martha reappears, leading Honey.

## **Act II : Walpurgisnacht : Scene IV**

### **Summary and Analysis**

This scene begins with the entrance of Martha and Honey, continues with the narration by Martha of George's attempts to publish a novel, and then shifts to George's narration which is a description of Honey and Nick's courtship and marriage, presented as though it were the subject of George's new novel. The scene ends when Honey runs off stage to throw up again.

The scene is one of the longest in the drama and is organized around two significant games. The first game is "Humiliate the Host," and the second is "Get the Guests." A third game, "Hump the Hostess," is mentioned but is postponed until a later time. The first game begins with a long discussion in which Martha attacks George and accuses him of causing Honey to throw up. Honey assures them that she has always had a tendency to throw up. Martha again violates her and George's private rules of the game by mentioning their "son." She maintains that "George makes everybody sick . . ." Then she carelessly mentions how George used to make their son sick. At first, George is again shocked that their son is so openly discussed, but then he plunges into

*Who's Afraid of Virginia  
Woolf ?  
(Edward Elbee)*



the discussion, using their son as the subject of his wit as he begins to make up stories of how their son was terribly upset because Martha would come in to him with her "kimono flying" and would attempt to corner him with an implied intent to commit incest. Martha retaliates by screaming that she "Never Cornered The Son of A Bitch in My Life!" Clearly, she could not have as he did not exist, but ironically, as she is portrayed, the imaginary child is the son of a verbal bitch.

The first game, "Humiliate the Host," certainly is precipitated by Honey's request for more brandy, followed by George's comment that he used to drink brandy. This comment prompts Martha to remind him that he also used to drink "bergin." The mention of "bergin" then prompts Martha to begin her story of George's unpublished novel.

From George's pleading attempts to get Martha to refrain from telling the story, we can conclude that she has told the story to other people before, especially since Martha twice repeats that George usually tells his side of the story also. At this point George decides that he has to find "some new way to fight" against Martha's destructive impulses.

After Honey suggests dancing, the two couples pair off in a sort of symbolic parody of "partner swapping," and while Martha and Nick are dancing, with all sorts of suggestive body movements, Martha completes her humiliation of her husband by revealing the most personal and intimate details of her husband's failure in life, that is, she ridicules his professional ineptitude and his cowardice in the manner in which he yielded to her father's demands that he not publish his book. Her father's ordering George not to publish is the worse type of intellectual censorship and for George to yield to this is extreme intellectual cowardice. George has, however, learned to live with it until this night when Martha violates another of the basic rules of their game - she reveals publicly not only one of their personal failures, but also reveals illusions that they have used to avoid facing their failures.

The humiliation for George is so intense because in his previous conversations with Nick, he has presented himself (or has posed as) a champion of truth and intellectual freedom. Now Martha has exposed her husband as a fraud before a vigorous, handsome young man. Thus, Martha's expose of all of George's weaknesses and of the lies he tells to cover up his failures so profoundly humiliates him that he physically attacks Martha violently, trying to choke her into silence. Whereas the attack against Martha with the toy popgun was comic, this attack is no longer comic; it carries with it the true seeds of violence and the possibility of great physical harm. This scene thus becomes a significant turning point in the drama as we see that George "is hurt, but it is more a profound humiliation than a physical injury." Martha



perceptively recognizes this potential danger and after Nick has stopped the attack, she calls George a "murderer." Thematically, in the next act he will become a murderer as he kills his own son, and may have been a murderer in his past.

Even though George is now at his lowest depths, he quickly recovers and announces that they have successfully completed the game of "Humiliate the Host" and now they must find another game. Since it is not time yet for "Hump the Hostess," George suggests a game of "Get the Guests" in which he proceeds to tell the plot of his second novel - a surprise to Martha. In a thinly disguised allegory, George proceeds to tell the story of Nick and Honey's engagement and marriage with all the appropriate background about Honey's father. At the climax of the story, Honey realizes that this is her story, and she realizes that Nick has betrayed the most personal details of their past. This betrayal makes her physically sick and she rushes again from the room.

In narrating the story, George is able to show Nick how it feels to be humiliated by placing Nick in such a position. He also directly exposes Nick as a person who cannot be trusted with a secret, so that the events of this night might not be safe with someone so untrustworthy. By exposing Nick, he is also able to show Martha that her new infatuation is for a person of questionable integrity.

## **Act II : Walpurgisnacht : Scenes V-VI**

### **Summary and Analysis**

In scene V, Nick tells of his resentment about the story George has revealed and threatens to get even with George and then exits to look after Honey. After he is gone, George and Martha argue about the events of the night.

In the conversation between George and Martha, George tells her of his resentment of the humiliating way she has treated him. Martha assumes that George is masochistic enough that he wants to be treated (or humiliated) the way he has been: "You Can Stand It!! You Married Me For It!!" She believes that George needs her to whip him so that he will not have to take any blame for his failures. Although George sees the truth in this, he feels she has gone too far and his future actions will allow him to try to correct this situation. The scene ends with both declaring "total war" against each other.

## **Act II : Walpurgisnacht : Scenes VII-X**

### **Summary and Analysis**

In scene VII, Nick re-enters to report that Honey is resting on the tiles of the bathroom floor. In scene VIII, while George is out getting ice, Martha and

*Who's Afraid of Virginia  
Woolf?*  
(Edward Elbee)

Nick continue their sexual flirtation and Martha is the aggressor. George re-enters, notices their actions, and exits again without acknowledging them. He re-enters a moment later singing "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?," delivers the ice, and then ignores them, sits in a chair and reads a book about history. This infuriates Martha because she does not know how to react to this new behavior. This scene has not been programmed and she has the sense that she is losing control of the situation. As George ignores them, pretending to be content with his book, Martha becomes "livid" with anger since she is obviously using Nick to make George angry. She then sends Nick to the kitchen to wait.

In scene IX, George's pretended obliviousness to the sex play going on between Nick and Martha causes Martha to threaten that she will indeed go to bed with Nick if George doesn't stop her. Martha's frantic threats such as "I swear to God I'll do it," "I swear to God I'll follow that guy into the kitchen, and then I'll take him upstairs . . ." and "I'll make you regret. . . ." indicate that this is indeed the first time that she has ever gone this far. In spite of the fact that Martha has been presented otherwise, this night represents a new departure for George and Martha. It is the first time that their "son" has been mentioned to outsiders, and it is also the first time that Martha has gone so far in seducing another person.

## **Act II : Walpurgisnacht : Scenes X-XI**

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### **Summary and Analysis**

In scene X, George is left alone and his reactions reveal his inner emotions. The passage from the book George is reading, Spengler's *Decline of the West*, is appropriate because it deals with "crippling alliances" and "a morality too rigid to accommodate itself . . ." After a pause, he violently hurls the book at the chimes. If this type of scene (between Martha and Nick) had been a frequent occurrence, George would be accustomed to it. Instead, however, he is hurt and bewildered. His desperation is expressed in his hurling the book.

In scene XI, the chiming awakens Honey who has been dreaming. In telling about her dream, Honey reveals that she does not want children - that she is afraid. George immediately perceives that Honey's headaches, nausea, and "whining" stem from something other than alcohol. The implication is either that she aborted her first pregnancy out of fear of childbirth or currently takes, and will continue, to take birth control pills to prevent the pregnancies that Nick might want or expect her to have. In addition, she remains "childlike" (sucking her thumb, sleeping in a fetal position) to avoid having to face the adult responsibility of pregnancy. In contrast to Martha, the "earth mother"

who can't have any children, Honey is the eternal child who refuses to have any children.

When a loud noise ("the crashing of dishes") is heard off stage, George tries to tell Honey what is going on between Martha and Nick, but she only wants to know who rang the chimes. George puns that the bang, bang of the bells announce the sexual bang, bang of Martha and Nick's affair, but Honey ignores this.

The query about the bells inspires George to conceive of a way to get back at Martha. He convinces Honey that the doorbell was rung by a messenger with the news that his and Martha's son is dead. Since the audience does not yet know that the son is an imaginary one, George's decision to tell Martha that their son is dead would appear to the audience to be an extremely cruel lie - a horrible, sick joke that goes beyond the boundaries of the other games that they have been playing.

### **Act III : The Exorcism : Scene I**

#### **Summary and Analysis**

In scene I, Martha is alone, and her soliloquy reveals her sense of abandonment and a desire to make up with George. She imagines a scene where they admit that they would do anything for each other. After remembering the game, "Hump the Hostess," she prepares the audience for Nick's failure by repeating "Fat chance . . . Fat chance." She goes on to talk about her father, herself, and George and recognizes the sadness and bitterness that underscores her relationship with them both.

### **Act III : The Exorcism : Scene II**

#### **Summary and Analysis**

In this scene between Nick and Martha, Nick reports that Honey is again lying curled up on the bathroom tiles and is peeling the label off the brandy bottle. This scene ends when George enters with the snapdragons.

The first significant revelation is that, for all of his youthfulness and acclaimed athletic prowess, Nick has been "a flop" in bed. "A flop" is used several times in this scene to emphasize Nick's failure. Even though Nick blames alcohol for his sexual failure in bed, the fact that he has failed causes Martha to look at her own failures and inadequacies and to realize that George is the only person who can fulfill her emotionally and physically. She realizes it is "George who is good to me, and whom I revile; who understands me and whom I push off; who can make me laugh, and I choke it back . . . who keeps learning the games we play as quickly as I can change the rules; who can make me happy and I do not wish to be happy . . ."

*Who's Afraid of Virginia  
Woolf?*  
(Edward Elbee)

Nick, in his youthful vigor, finds it unbelievable that George can satisfy Martha. Martha, who now calls herself the "Earth Mother," comes to George's defense and relegates Nick to the position of "houseboy," which signals yet another game. In other words, if Nick can't perform in bed, then he can at least be a houseboy. As the doorbell rings, she orders him to answer it. When Nick resists being reduced to the level of a "flunky," Martha hurls at him an insulting remark about his impotence: ". . . Answer the door. There must be something you can do well; or, are you too drunk to do that, too? Can't you get the latch up, either?" Then she reminds Nick of his ambitions and career: "You didn't chase me around the kitchen . . . out of mad, driven passion, did you now? You were thinking a little bit about your career, weren't you? Well, you can just houseboy your way up." Thus, because Nick, like all the men in Martha's life, has disappointed Martha, he is reduced by her to a house servant.

### **Act III : The Exorcism : Scene III**

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#### **Summary and Analysis**

This scene between George, Martha, and Nick concerns the discussion of Nick as "stud" or "houseboy" and ends when George announces there is one more game to be played and sends Nick to bring Honey back onto the scene.

This scene corresponds to or parallels the earlier scene in Act I where George "flings open the door" for Nick and Honey. Whereas earlier George (as the houseboy) had opened the door for Nick to the accompaniment of Martha's "Screw You," now Nick opens the door for George yelling "Christ!" Ironically, George appears in the role of a reverse- or Anti-Christ. But instead of bringing the message of an everlasting life and hope as did Christ, George appears with flowers ("Flores; flores para los muertos.") for the dead and he will assume the omnipotent role of declaring their son to be dead. Thus, as Martha's original "Screw You" had become the central metaphor of the play, now George's assuming a Christ-like authority in deciding matters of the life and death of their son brings about the resolution of the drama.

From the audience's viewpoint, George's comic behavior must seem to be both grotesque and in extremely bad taste since the audience knows that George is here to announce the death of their son. All of his horseplay, his falsetto voice in using a line from Tennessee William's *A Streetcar Named Desire* ("Flores; flores para Jos muertos"), his choice of snapdragons (hardly an appropriate symbol for death), his comic pretense of mistaking Nick for their imaginary son, the derogatory innuendoes concerning their child, the mock-childlike bantering and imitation of courtship - all of this buffoonery must seem terribly out of place in view of the recent "death" of their son.

With his entrance, George brings up the main concerns of the drama and more explicitly, the major concern of this act: the idea of "truth and illusion. Who knows the difference?" - a concern which prompts Nick to later utter his most significant line thus far: "Hell, I don't know when you people are lying, or what." Essentially, the discussion centers on whether or not the moon can come up again after it has gone down. This discussion is interspersed with comments about whether or not Nick could get it up with Martha. Is Nick now the "stud," one who could perform in bed - or is he the "houseboy," one who failed to make it in bed? After Martha lies (we, the audience, know from the preceding scene that Nick was a failure in bed) and says that Nick is "not a houseboy," George is now not certain what is truth and what is illusion. He becomes vindictive by throwing snapdragons at Nick and Martha as though they were spears.

As George tells us, the games that they play are getting more serious. The game of this scene, "Snap The Dragon," carries overtones of viciousness. While this game is being played by George, Nick, and Martha, Honey is off stage playing her slick "solo" game of "peel the label."

George's vindictiveness could be interpreted (as it has been by some critics) as a desire to take out his resentment against Martha and Nick because they have "cuckolded" him. However, in terms of the larger structure of the "games people play," George has already conceded to the idea of Martha and Nick's sexual encounter at the end of Act II. But if one is going to play a game, certain rules must be followed. Therefore if Nick "made it in the sack" with Martha, then the rules of the game make him a "stud." If he didn't, then he is a "houseboy." What ultimately disturbs George is that "Someone's lying around here; somebody isn't playing the game straight." The audience knows that Martha and Nick are not adhering to the rules of the new game. As George tells Nick: "If you're a houseboy, you can pick up after me; if you're a stud, you can go protect your plow [i.e., Martha]." It is not that George has to know truth from illusion, but the game requires that "we must carry on as though we did." George then announces that there is one more game to play, "Bringing up Baby," and he sends Nick to "fetch" Honey.

### **Act III : The Exorcism : Scene IV**

#### **Summary and Analysis**

In this short scene, Martha pleads for no more games, but George has elaborate plans for the next game and the purpose of the scene is to get Martha primed and in a fighting mood : he wants Martha on her "feet and slugging . . . because . . . we're going to play this one to the death." And ironically, the game will end with the "death" of their son.



**Summary and Analysis**

This scene, the longest and also the climactic scene, begins with all four characters on stage and ends with the death of the imaginary son. The principal game is "Bringing up Baby" an ironic twist because after he has been brought up the scene will end with the next game - "Kill the Kid."

With the appearance of Nick and Honey, George re-introduces the concern of the first act (fun and games), and he announces that during the evening that they have gotten "to know each other, and have had fun and games . . . [such as] curl up on the floor . . . peel the label." Honey's game introduces a new metaphor, peeling the label. This is introduced because in peeling the label, we get down to the bone and even "when you get down to bone, you haven't got all the way, yet. There's something inside the bone . . . the marrow" [ellipsis Albee's]. This new metaphor (new game) suggests that once we get to the marrow, there can be no more deeper probing; that is, this game will be the game that will cut through all illusion and confront one face to face with reality. For George and Martha, who have not faced reality for about twenty years, this will be a supreme test. Whereas earlier Martha seemingly had the "upper hand," now George realizes the necessity of distinguishing between illusion and reality: the only possible solution to their lives and the only solution to their marriage ties in complete honesty. Consequently, whereas earlier George had tried to prevent Martha from bringing up the subject of their son, it is now George who insists that their son (the bouncy boy) be the subject of the next game, "Bringing Up Baby."

Since the audience knows that George is going to announce the death of their son, this "scene-a-faire" is necessary for the audience to see how complete George and Martha's illusion really is. That is, the illusion surrounding the birth is necessary so that the audience can see how completely this illusion has occupied George and Martha's lives. The illusion is not a small portion of their lives. Instead, it has occupied their lives to the minutest detail, as illustrated by whether it was an easy birth or whether Martha "labored to give birth." All of the details are carefully worked out between them - the toys, the child's furniture, the color of the eyes and hair, and other details.

Martha, who has never mentioned "the kid" before others, becomes almost transfigured into a Madonna as she becomes so completely immersed in her own illusion of their child. Martha's narration is both moving and convincing as she correlates her "son's" growth to the epitome of everything that is truth, beauty, wisdom, and earthly perfection. The effect of her narration is to evoke from Honey a desire to have a child of her own.

Dramatically speaking, the audience should be constantly aware that George knows that the child does not exist. Yet before he reveals the death of their son, he too becomes, for the last time, caught up in the illusion. In a shift typical of the play, Martha changes from the Madonna-type figure recalling idyllic episodes about her son to a bitter critic of their sordid home life. George argues violently with Martha about whom the child loved more. Then in the form of a duet, Martha continues the narration about the child while George recites Latin phrases from the Requiem and Kyrie Eleison.

Martha and Honey are ready to put an end to the games, but George has one more surprise for Martha: "It's about sunny-Jim." He then announces the death of their son:

George: Martha . . . (Long pause) . . . our son is (Silence) He was . . . killed . . . late in the afternoon . . . (Silence) (A tiny chuckle) on a country road, with his earner's permit in his pocket, he swerved, to avoid a porcupine, and drove straight into a . . .

Martha (Rigid fury) : you . . . cannot . . . do . . . that!

George: . . . large tree.

To the astonishment and confusion of both the audience and Nick, Martha repeatedly insists that she will not allow George to "decide these things," and she attempts to physically attack George. Nick pins Martha's arms behind her because he thinks that she is hysterically overcome with grief. While Nick is holding her, George flippantly and triumphantly tells her: "Now listen, Martha; listen carefully. We got a telegram; there was a car accident, and he's dead. Pouf! Just like that! Now, how do you like it?"

Martha's response, (A howl which weakens into a moan) "Noooooooooooo," is one of the high dramatic points in the drama and has been likened "to that tragic and awful moment of Sophocles's Oedipus, when Oedipus discovers he has not only unwittingly killed his own father but has also married his own mother and fathered her children." Martha continues to attack George's presumption that he can make such a decision by himself. The building of the illusion had been a joint effort; thus, she feels betrayed that the illusion is suddenly destroyed. Since the illusion had been so completely a part of her life, the destruction is a death-blow as strong as real physical death.

As Martha demands proof of the death and as George becomes more impatient, Nick gradually begins to understand something that is almost too much for him. When George reminds Martha that she knew the rules and has broken them, Nick finally understands that the child has always been an imaginary one. Consequently, of all of the games that have been played during the course of the drama, this is the most involved and elaborate one. Upon further questioning, Nick realizes that George and Martha created this fantasy

to compensate for the fact that they could not have any children, and to give themselves the illusion of a normal home life.

George and Martha's imaginary world was complete and resplendent with every detail necessary to the natural birth and growth of a real child, but one essential rule had to be followed. The game had to be completely private between the two - it could never be mentioned to an outsider. As long as it remained a private game, there could be all kinds of variations within the framework. Once, however, the child had been mentioned to other people, everything changed. There could be ridicule stemming from public exposure with all sorts of unknown results. But more importantly George recognizes that the illusion has gone on too long, especially now that Martha cannot distinguish illusion from reality, as indicated in her plea :

"I Forget! Sometimes . . . sometimes when it's night, when it's late, and . . . and everybody else is . . . talking . . . I forget and I . . . want to mention him . . . but I . . . hold on . . . I hold on . . . I hold on . . . but I've wanted to . . . so often . . . oh, George, you've pushed it . . . there was no need . . . there was no need for this. I mentioned him . . . all right . . . but you didn't have to push it over the edge. You didn't have to . . . kill him."

Also, George wants revenge, and he knows that the only way he can regain the upper hand in their relationship is to destroy Martha's belief in her most precious illusion. However, it is too simple to dismiss his motive as revenge alone. He has recognized the danger in believing in one's lies and it becomes necessary for George to kill the illusion to prevent Martha from becoming completely enslaved by her own fantasies.

George has penetrated past the bone and into the marrow. He has performed the complete exorcism and we must remember that an exorcism is performed for the benefit of the bedeviled - in this case, Martha.

### **Act III : The Exorcism : Scene VI**

#### **Summary and Analysis**

In this final, brief, but very moving scene between George and Martha, usually played in a very subdued, low-keyed manner, Martha is still hesitant to accept the death of their imaginary son. Even George falters for a moment when he says: "It will be better . . . maybe." George realizes that they have played with the imaginary child far too long, but he too seems to be afraid of facing reality.

When Martha says "I don't suppose, maybe we could . . ." the implication is that maybe they could find a new type of game for their escapism, but George, while fearful, will not agree.

Consequently, the two characters have divested themselves of their illusions and will now have to face reality completely alone. They are weakened, chastised, and subdued by the events of the evening, and they are now two very frightened and pitiable characters, but they are also two human beings who are communicating with each other with honesty and without illusion.

*Who's Afraid of Virginia  
Woolf?*  
(Edward Elbee)

## ANSWERS

### ■ Multiple Choice Questions

1. In what town does this play take place?  
(a) New Haven (b) New London  
(c) New Carthage (d) New Sparta
2. How old are protagonists George and Martha, respectively?  
(a) 46 and 52 (b) 46 and 40  
(c) 40 and 46 (d) 52 and 46
3. What is George's position at the college?  
(a) Associate Professor of History.  
(b) Head of The History Department.  
(c) Interim Head of The History Department.  
(d) President of The College.
4. What actress does Martha quote at the opening of the play?  
(a) Barbara Stanwyck (b) Bette Davis  
(c) Gloria Swanson (d) Elizabeth Taylor
5. Where did their guests, Nick and Honey, move from?  
(a) California (b) The Midwest  
(c) Europe (d) New York
6. In what department does Nick teach?  
(a) History (b) Biology  
(c) Math (d) Philosophy
7. When describing the college town to Nick, to which mythological/literary place does George not compare it?  
(a) Gomorrah (b) Penguin Island  
(c) Hades (d) Ilyria
8. What is Honey's drink of choice?  
(a) She doesn't drink (b) Whiskey  
(c) Brandy (d) Bourbon
9. How does George repeatedly describe Honey?  
(a) "Slim-Hipped." (b) "Mouse-Like."  
(c) "Frail." (d) "Pretty as A Picture."
10. How old does Martha tell Honey her son will turn tomorrow?  
(a) 12 (b) 21 (c) 16 (d) 25



11. What happens when George points a rifle at Martha and pulls the trigger?
  - (a) He purposefully shoots above her head.
  - (b) Nothing happens.
  - (c) The Gun Jams.
  - (d) A Parasol Pops Out of The Gun.
12. To what animal does George liken his father-in-law?
  - (a) An Albino Squirrel.
  - (b) A Slippery Snake.
  - (c) A Red-Eyed White Mouse.
  - (d) A Wise Old Owl.
13. What novel does Martha reference in the story of her college affair with the gardener?
  - (a) The House of Mirth
  - (b) Romeo and Juliet
  - (c) Lady Chatterly's Lover
  - (d) Tess of The D'urbervilles
14. What ultimately leads George to smash a liquor bottle and begin singing "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf" at the end of Act One?
  - (a) Martha's insistence on calling him a failure for remaining an associate professor.
  - (b) Martha's story of George's unpublished autobiographical novel.
  - (c) Martha's blatant attempts at seducing Nick in front of him.
  - (d) Martha's refusal to stop talking about their son.
15. How does Honey respond to George's rendition of "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" at the end of Act One?
  - (a) She asks Nick if they can leave.
  - (b) She bursts into tears.
  - (c) She runs to the bathroom to be sick.
  - (d) She says, "I am."
16. At the beginning of Act Two, why does Nick tell George he married Honey?
  - (a) She was the daughter of the president of the college where he used to work.
  - (b) She was sick.
  - (c) She was experiencing a hysterical pregnancy.
  - (d) He believed he was in love with her.
17. How does George characterize the story about the boy who ordered "bergin"?
  - (a) The most embarrassing experience ever.
  - (b) The happiest day of his life.
  - (c) Just a funny story.
  - (d) An illusion of happiness to cover the real pain.



18. In George's story, why did the boy crash into a tree?
  - (a) He was swerving to avoid a porcupine.
  - (b) He was trying to kill his father.
  - (c) He was trying to kill himself.
  - (d) He was swerving to avoid a dog.
19. What does Albee request in the stage directions after George's speech about the boy who accidentally killed his parents?
  - (a) A Blackout.
  - (b) Closed Curtains.
  - (c) A Five-Second Paure.
  - (d) Immediate Laughter from Nick.
20. To what child's toy does George compare his and Martha's son?
  - (a) A Rocking Horse.
  - (b) A Bean Bag.
  - (c) A Doll.
  - (d) A Teddy Bear.
21. According to George, why does he call the son "the apple of our three eyes?"
  - (a) Martha pays attention to the son half the time.
  - (b) Martha is a cyclops.
  - (c) George isn't sure the "apple" grew from his tree.
  - (d) George is blind in one eye.
22. In what language do Martha and George exchange rapid-fire insults that translate to "monster," "pig," "beast," "scoundrel," and "whore?"
  - (a) German
  - (b) Greek
  - (c) Latin
  - (d) French
23. How, according to Nick, did Honey's father get rich?
  - (a) He was a poor preacher who inherited it from his second wife.
  - (b) He was a famous preacher who stole the church's money.
  - (c) He was a famous preacher who saved his own money.
  - (d) He published an autobiographical novel about his experiences as a preacher.
24. Which of the following is not part of Nick's plan to get ahead at the college?
  - (a) Looking for weak spots.
  - (b) Blackmailing the college president.
  - (c) Taking over some courses from older professors.
  - (d) Seducing faculty wives.
25. What song that she "understands" does George say Martha will put on to dance to?
  - (a) l'orfeo
  - (b) Le Sacre Du printemps
  - (c) Dies Irae
  - (d) Symphonie Fantastique

## ■ Short Answers Type Questions

1. What does the wolf symbolize in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in relation to the fairy tale "The Three Little Pigs"?
2. Why do George and Martha repeatedly sing "Virginia Woolf" instead of "the big bad wolf" in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*
3. What do George's and Martha's names symbolize in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*
4. What is the significance of Nick's position as a biology professor in relation to George's profession as a history professor?
5. Why does George repeatedly refer to Honey's "slim hips" in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*
6. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* why do George and Martha repeatedly and mistakenly think Nick is in the math department when he is really in the biology department?
7. What do children symbolize to the two couples portrayed in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*
8. How does Nick's name reveal his character in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*
9. How does Honey's name in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* evoke a stereotype from the 1960s?
10. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* why does Albee open with a "crash against the front door" and what does the crash foreshadow?

## ■ Long Answers Type Questions

1. The play takes place between 2 a.m. and dawn. Is the time significant, then, in terms of the events of the night?
2. How can you account for the lack of interaction between Martha and Honey?
3. Do you think most relationships are characterized by various types of game-playing? Why or why not? Are games always harmful?
4. What are the elements of a tragedy? Does this play qualify as a tragic drama?
5. Do you believe that personalities are "inherent" or that "events shape people?" Discuss each character in terms of how each is portrayed and whether or not there are reasons for each character's present situation.
6. What does Honey learn from her exposure to George and Martha?
7. Do you approve of Nick's ambition?
8. What does the title of the play mean?

## Answers

### ➤ Multiple Choice Questions

- |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| 1. (c)  | 2. (a)  | 3. (a)  | 4. (b)  | 5. (b)  | 6. (b)  | 7. (c)  | 8. (c)  |
| 9. (a)  | 10. (b) | 11. (d) | 12. (c) | 13. (c) | 14. (a) | 15. (c) | 16. (c) |
| 17. (b) | 18. (a) | 19. (c) | 20. (b) | 21. (b) | 22. (d) | 23. (c) | 24. (b) |
| 25. (b) |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |

सर्वे भवन्तु सुखिनः सर्वे सन्तु निरामयाः ।  
सर्वे भद्राणिः पश्यन्तु माकष्टिद् दुःख भाग्भवेत् ॥

## DIRECTORATE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION



Swami Vivekanand

**SUBHARTI UNIVERSITY**

Subhartipuram, NH-58, Delhi-Haridwar Bypass Road,  
Meerut, Uttar Pradesh 250005

Phone : 0121-243 9043

Website : [www.subhartidde.com](http://www.subhartidde.com), E-mail : [ddesvsu@gmail.com](mailto:ddesvsu@gmail.com)