

The Scarlet Letter

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Mamta

THE TIME OF THE TALE AND PLACE

- The story starts off with the Custom House narrated by a clerk who introduces the legend of *The Scarlet Letter* by finding an embroidered piece of cloth with the letter “A” on it.
- The locale of the story is Boston, Massachusetts in New England
- The time of the story is mid 17th Century that is the time of early settlers in America

FEATURES OF THE STORY

- The year is 1642.
- The place is Boston, a small Puritan settlement. Before the town jail, a group of somber people wait with stern expressions
- Prison, Marketplace, and scaffold are the central points
- The dresses, expressions of the people are grey and coarse

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Hester Prynne; woman punished for her sin of adultery
- Arthur Dimmesdale; A much loved Pastor but co-sinner of adultery
- Roger Chillingworth; Hester's husband who has come to Boston suddenly after two years.
- Pearl; Hester and Dimmesdale's illegitimate daughter

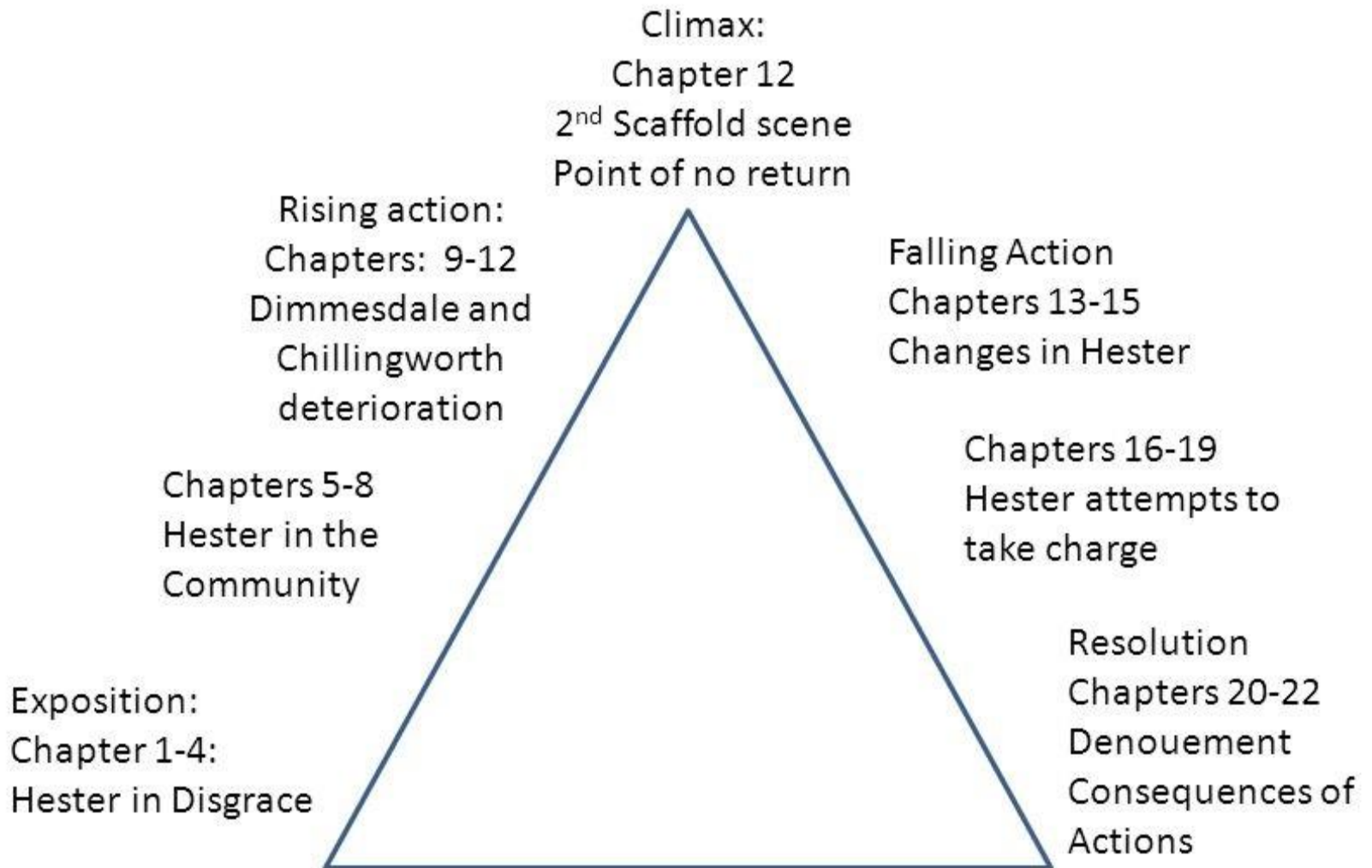
MINOR CHARACTERS

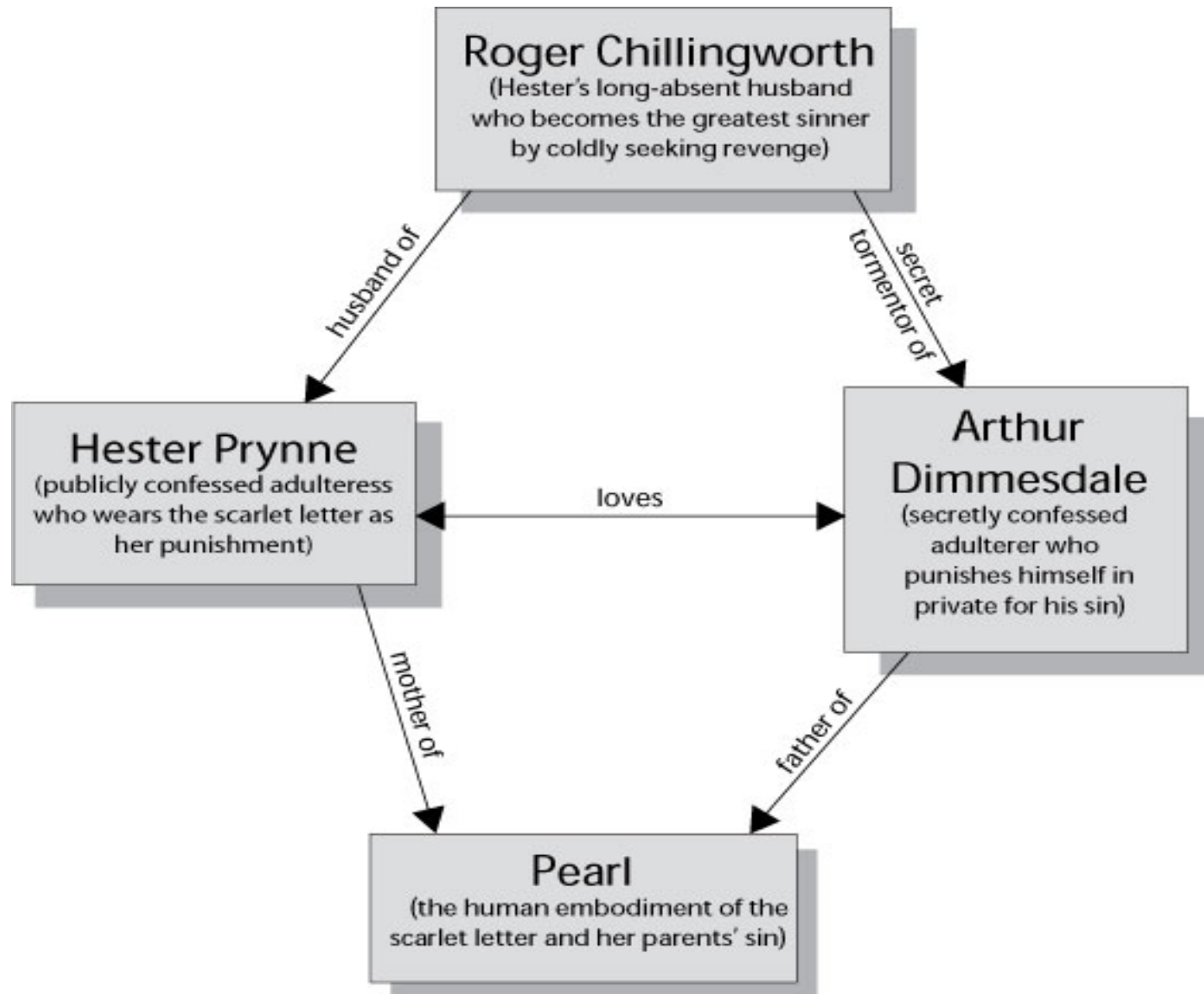
- Governor Bellingham; The new governor of Boston
- Reverend Wilson: The senior and aged Priest
- Mistress Hibbins: Governor's spinster sister
- Governor Winthrop; The previous governor

PURITANISM

- Their doctrines stressed original sin--that all people are sinners (for Adam sinned), but that God, in his infinite mercy, has chosen to save a few.
- Puritans were constantly examining their lives, especially their thoughts and inclinations, to see if they indicated whether they might be saved.
- They knew that people who "seemed" to live good lives might in fact be sinners and damned (although they recognized that all were sinners.)

Traditional Plot Structure





QUESTIONS ADDRESSED

- **Sin and redemption**
- **The Nature of Evil**
- **Identity and Society**
- **Civilization versus the Wilderness**
- **Night versus Day**

HESTER PRYNNNE-HER SIN AND HER REDEMPTION

- A passionate woman who lives her life with an independent streak
- Hester's **isolation** is physical
- A strong woman who bears the hardships of life
- Stands for a strong but silent female protest in a puritan society which fails to break her
- She works out her redemption slowly and painfully in public view.
- The letter A changes from Adultery to Able
- Her service for those in need is her redemption

ROGER CHILLINGWORTH: HESTER'S HUSBAND

- A Scholarly person who marries late in life
- Revenge transforms him into a fiend
- His deterioration into an evil man is pitiable and terrifying
- His knowledge and astuteness is profound
- He believes that Hester has got punished for her sin
- His Sin is bigger and irredemable than Dimmesdale's as he tries to ruin the soul.
- His isolation is moral and spiritual.

ARTHUR DIMMESDALE

- Young and learned Priest
- Gifted with the Tongue of Flame
- Moral coward and depends on Hester to bring him out of his cowardly silence, yet is relieved over her silence
- Too sensitive to be able to bear the falsehood of his own existence as a priest
- Suffers a deep anguish but makes a mockery of it by keeping vigils and fasts in secret
- His death redeems him as he refuses to succumb to the temptations of a happy life with Hester and confesses.

PEARL

- Hester's daughter named so for her preciousness as a child of true love
- Her closeness with the nature is very symbolic
- She instinctively refuses to associate with the society that has punished her mother
- Pearl is a free spirit-a victim of the sin of her parents and, the repressiveness of the Puritan society. Eventually she symbolizes only ray of hope and leaves the settlement for greener pastures where she settles down.

A PSYCHOLOGICAL NOVEL

- The pioneer novel that probes the psyche of the characters
- Hawthorne presents the inner workings of the characters
- Hester is consumed with a dread when she sees a strangeness in the behaviour of Pearl and she introspects about the possible reasons
- Dimmesdale is apprehensive and alerted in the presence of Chillingworth and the thoughts related going on in his mind makes a beautiful piece of psychology.
- Chillingworth is a great observer and an intellect. His psychological response to various characters is astute.

THEME OF SIN AND EXPIATION

- Sin and Expiation are the Christian concepts.
- The Puritans believed in the concept of original sin
- The Protestants, likewise believe all have sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God.
- The Catholic distinguishes between general sins and "deadly sins". This is used as the basis for the differentiation between venial and mortal

Theme of Isolation and alienation

Loneliness seems to be the curse blighting the principal characters in *The Scarlet Letter*. Isolation or alienation from the mainstream seems to be their lot.

- Hester is physically isolated from the society Hester Prynne's isolation is inflicted upon her rather than willfully sought by her; her Isolation is her "badge of shame". she is isolated from society but not alienated from humanity.
- Pearl, too, is alienated from the company of the rest of the children in the community on account of her mother's offense. .
- And Arthur Dimmesdale is strange even to himself for the pangs of conscience constantly trouble and torture him. He is divided between his priestly duties and desire for revealing his true nature to the people who worship him. .
- Roger Chillingworth is alone in her pursuit of revenge. Chillingworth's isolation is essentially the isolation of a person who has been wronged by his wife and his pursuit of revenge. He has "violated the sanctity of the human heart

This isolation has positive results

- In Hester's case. She "transcends her separation from society by good deeds and the companionship of miserable people".
- In Dimmesdale's case, his sensitivity to his sin makes him conscious of his unworthiness to lead his flock. It leads to private suffering and torture. He feels suffocated in this repressive environment, but is too weak to make an effort to get out of it. Death is his only deliverance." -

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