

Reading *The Scarlet Letter*
Amanda Claybaugh

order, duration, and frequency of events: The novel proceeds chronologically: it returns to the past only very rarely, and these returns are not narrated as analepses, but rather depicted in the present as the characters' fragmentary memories. Note the few things that the characters do remember, and reflect on their significance.

narration: The novel's narration is strikingly variable. At times, it is focalized through one of the major characters, but even then it only sometimes enters the character's minds, and, on at least one notable occasion, it refuses to depict all that the focalizing character can see. Note these shifts in narration and reflect on how they contribute to the novel's effects. The narrator himself is strikingly elusive. At times, he is certain about events and motivations; at times, he speculates about what may "perchance" be the case; and at times, he reports the townspeople's own speculations, usually distancing himself from them. Note these shifts, too, and use them to guide your interpretation of the novel. And finally, the narrator's own views of Puritan society are far from clear: at times, he speaks of them with heavy-handed irony, but at other times, with sympathy and respect. Characterize the narrator as a persona, and compare this persona to the one presented in "The Custom House."

characters: The novel's two main characters (Hester and Dimmesdale) are each paired with a companion (Pearl and Chillingworth). Identify the functions these companions perform, and compare how they do so. Also reflect on the function of the minor characters (Gov. Bellingham, Rev. Wilson, and Mistress Hibbins) who frequently appear.

plot: The events of the plot are intricately patterned in this novel. Three scaffold scenes (one at the beginning, one at the end, and one precisely in the middle) divide the novel into two halves, and events within each half mirror and revise those in the other, while the characters interact with one another, almost dance-like, in turn. Identify as many of these patterns as you can. Also reflect on why the novel's *fabula* begins where it does, rather than sooner.

details: The novel takes place in two settings, the town and the forest; pay attention to the details depicted in each. Pay attention, too, to the novel's many descriptions of crowds: who is included in each crowd? who is excluded? what are they like? Reflect on what these descriptions reveal about the novel's conception of society.

heteroglossia: The most significant alternate discourse for *The Scarlet Letter* does not appear within the novel, but rather alongside it, in the attached memoir essay entitled "The Custom House." Reflect on how the presence of this supplemental text changes our reading of the novel.