




CHAPTER FIVE

Hester and Pearl

 **H**ester Prynne's prison term was over. The prison door was thrown open, and she came out into the bright sunshine. For Hester's tormented heart, the sunshine had no other purpose than to reveal the scarlet letter on her breast.

From this day on, she would be alone in the world with her shame. And each day would be the same, as her burden of shame, misery and solitude grew heavier and harder to bear. Even after her death, her grave would bear the sign of her sin, of her shame.

Hester, however, was free to leave the Puritan settlement of Boston. She was free to return to her birthplace or to any other European land, where she could begin a new life. But there is a strange fatality that attracts human beings irresistibly to the

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place where a great event has given colour and perhaps meaning to their lives. And it seems that the more tragic the event, the greater the attraction to that place.

Her sin, her ignominy,¹ were the roots that she had planted in the soil of the Puritan settlement. Perhaps another feeling kept her there too; a feeling that she was afraid to recognize, a feeling that she hid from herself. In the Puritan settlement, there lived the man who was her partner in sin and the father of her child.

She forced herself to believe that the reason for remaining in New England was that here, she would purge her soul through humiliation, shame and suffering.

Therefore, Hester did not flee. She and her child went to live



in a small thatched cottage near the seashore and far from the Puritan settlement. She lived a life of isolation. She had no friends.

Her only contact with other humans was through her work. She possessed an art that was required even in these barren² lands—the art of needle work. She was exceptionally skilled with the needle.

Public ceremonies, installation of magistrates, funeral robes and baby linen all required rich embroidery and beautiful

1. **ignominy** [ɪɡnəmɪni] : disgrace, dishonour, humiliation.
2. **barren** : empty, arid.

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ornamentation. Hester had a good amount of work to do all year long. But never was she called to embroider the white veil of a young bride. This indicated the relentless¹ vigour with which society punished her for her sin.

Hester often gave contributions to charity to help the poor of the community. She made clothes for them too. The poor often scorned² her, but they readily accepted her charity.

Hester felt completely excluded from society. Every gesture, every word, and even the silence of those she contacted expressed that she was banished.³

If she entered a church on the Sabbath, she was immediately the object of gossip and scorn. Hester began to fear children for when she walked through the town they followed her, screaming insults.

Terrible legends grew around the scarlet letter. Some people believed that it was red-hot with infernal fire, and could be seen glowing at night when Hester walked outside.

Hester had named her little girl Pearl because a pearl was an object of great price. And she had paid a very high price indeed for her Pearl.

Hester knew that what she had done was evil, and she believed that its result would not be good. Therefore, she fearfully examined Pearl, expecting to discover something dark, peculiar or perverse in the child.

Pearl had no physical defect. She had an inborn grace that

1. **relentless** : persistent, incessant, inflexible.
2. **scorned** : treated with anger and disrespect.
3. **banished** : sent away.

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accompanied her flawless ¹ beauty. In this little girl, there was something both wild and majestic.

Hester made her richly decorated dresses that enhanced ² Pearl's beauty. She did everything in her power to be a strict, but loving mother.

As Pearl grew, Hester could not help asking herself if she was a human child. Her shiny black eyes had a look that was very intelligent, yet inexplicable, perverse and sometimes malicious. She was an enigma for her mother. For the townspeople, Pearl was a demon offspring ³ —a living sin!

The first thing Pearl noticed in her life was the scarlet letter on Hester's breast. She would grab it with her little hand and then she would look into her mother's eyes with a peculiar smile. This peculiar smile puzzled and frightened Hester.

Pearl was an outcast ⁴ in the children's world. She was considered a product of sin, an evil child that had no right to be with the other children of the Puritan community of Boston.



1. **flawless** : without defect.
2. **enhanced** : made appear greater, exalted.
3. **offspring** : child.
4. **outcast** : person who is rejected by his social group.

- 1 a. When Hester's prison term was over, why did she decide to remain in Boston?
- b. Where did Hester and her child, Pearl, live?
- c. How was their life?
- d. Describe Hester's work.
- e. Why was Hester afraid that there could be something perverse or peculiar in little Pearl?
- f. How did the townspeople consider Pearl?

 Find the opposites of the following words in the chapter you have just read.

peaceful	.....
pride	.....
repels	.....
comical	.....
triumph	.....
private	.....
rewarded	.....
respected	.....
included	.....
heavenly	.....
tame	.....
stupid	.....

3 Now use these words to fill in the gaps of the following sentences.

- The Puritan society her with relentless vigour.
- ceremonies and installation of magistrates all required rich embroidery.
- Some people believed the scarlet letter was red-hot with fire.
- The poor her, but accepted her charity.
- She wanted to purge her soul through, shame and suffering.
- For Hester's heart, the sunshine had no other purpose than to reveal the scarlet letter on her breast.
- There was something both and majestic in this little girl.
- Hester felt completely from society.
- She was alone in the world with her
- The more the event, the greater the attraction to the place.
- There is a strange fatality that human beings to the place where a great event has happened.
- Her black eyes had a look that was very

Phrasal verbs

4 Look at this sentence from Chapter 5:

The prison door was thrown open, and she **came out into** the bright sunshine.

Came out into is a phrasal verb. Phrasal verbs are an important part of the English language. A phrasal verb is a combination of a verb and an adverb or preposition. Normally, the usual meaning of the verb is changed.

Themes for thought, discussion and writing

- 5** In addition to Hester's "official" punishment, the Puritan society punished her and Pearl relentlessly in many ways, through silence, isolation, exclusion, scorn and discrimination. Which of these forms of "indirect" punishment do you think causes more suffering? Why?
- 6** Hawthorne writes, "Every gesture... expressed that she was banished." Gestures, conscious or subconscious, are part of a person's body language. Body language should be observed and "listened to" because it often says more than words. Have you ever been in a situation where a person said one thing, but his or her body language expressed something entirely different?
- 7** Hester was free to leave Boston, but she chose to stay. Hawthorne writes that human beings are irresistibly attracted to the place where a "great event has given colour and perhaps meaning to their lives." This is very true with criminals, who return again and again to the scene of the crime. This has been a recurring theme in many novels, such as Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*.

Why do you think human beings are like this? Could it be the heart overruling the brain? Or could it be the subconscious desire to get caught and "pay" for the crime?