

The grass-plot before the jail, in Prison Lane, on a certain summer morning, not less than two centuries ago, was occupied by a pretty large number of the inhabitants of Boston, all with their eyes intently fastened on the iron-clamped oaken door. Amongst any other population, or at a later period in the history of New England, the grim rigidity that petrified the bearded physiognomies of these  
5 good people would have augured some awful business in hand. It might be that a sluggish bond-servant, or an undutiful child, whom his parents had given over to the civil authority, was to be corrected at the whipping-post. It might be that an Antinomian, a Quaker, or other heterodox religionist, was to be scourged out of the town, or an idle or vagrant Indian, whom the white man's firewater had made riotous about the streets, was to be driven with stripes into the shadow of the  
10 forest. It might be, too, that a witch was to die upon the gallows.

The door of the jail being flung open from within there appeared, in the first place, like a black shadow emerging into sunshine, the grim and grisly presence of the town-beadle, with a sword by his side, and his staff of office in his hand. This personage prefigured and represented in his aspect the whole dismal severity of the Puritanic code of law, which it was his business to administer in its final  
15 and closest application to the offender. Stretching forth the official staff in his left hand, he laid his right upon the shoulder of a young woman, whom he thus drew forward, until, on the threshold of the prison-door, she repelled him, by an action marked with natural dignity and force of character, and stepped into the open air as if by her own free will. She bore in her arms a child, a baby of some three months old, who winked and turned aside its little face from the too vivid light of day; because  
20 its existence, heretofore, had brought it acquaintance only with the grey twilight of a dungeon, or other darksome apartment of the prison.

When the young woman—the mother of this child—stood fully revealed before the crowd, it seemed to be her first impulse to clasp the infant closely to her bosom; not so much by an impulse of motherly affection, as that she might thereby conceal a certain token, which was wrought or fastened  
25 into her dress. In a moment, however, wisely judging that one token of her shame would but poorly serve to hide another, she took the baby on her arm, and with a burning blush, and yet a haughty smile, and a glance that would not be abashed, looked around at her townspeople and neighbours. On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter A. It was so artistically done, and with so much fertility  
30 and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel which she wore, and which was of a splendour in accordance with the taste of the age, but greatly beyond what was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony.

The grim beadle now made a gesture with his staff. "Make way, good people—make way, in the King's name!" cried he. "Open a passage; and I promise ye, Mistress Prynne shall be set where man,  
35 woman, and child may have a fair sight of her brave apparel from this time till an hour past meridian. A blessing on the righteous colony of the Massachusetts, where iniquity is dragged out into the sunshine! Come along, Madame Hester, and show your scarlet letter in the market-place!"

A lane was forthwith opened through the crowd of spectators. With almost a serene deportment, Hester Prynne came to a sort of scaffold, at the western extremity of the market-place. It stood nearly  
40 beneath the eaves of Boston's earliest church, and appeared to be a fixture there.

In fact, this scaffold constituted a portion of a penal machine, which was held, in the old time, to be as effectual an agent, in the promotion of good citizenship, as ever was the guillotine among the terrorists of France. It was, in short, the platform of the pillory. Knowing well her part, Hester Prynne ascended a flight of wooden steps, and was thus displayed to the surrounding multitude, at about the  
45 height of a man's shoulders above the street.

Had there been a Papist among the crowd of Puritans, he might have seen in this beautiful woman, so picturesque in her attire and mien, and with the infant at her bosom, an object to remind him of the image of Divine Maternity, which so many illustrious painters have vied with one another to represent; something which should remind him, indeed, but only by contrast, of that sacred image of  
50 sinless motherhood, whose infant was to redeem the world.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 1850 (shortened)

**abash:** embarrass, disconcert.  
**beadle:** a ceremonial officer of a church, college, etc.  
**blush:** develop a pink tinge in the face from embarrassment or shame.  
**bond-servant:** slave.  
**clamp:** a device for holding things together.  
**clasp:** grasp, hold closely; embrace, encircle.  
**cloth:** woven or felted material.  
**dismal:** causing or showing gloom; miserable; dreary or sombre.  
**display:** expose to view; exhibit; show; show ostentatiously.  
**dungeon:** a strong underground cell for prisoners.  
**dutiful:** obedient.  
**eaves (pl.):** the underside of a projected roof.  
**embroider:** decorate with needlework.  
**embroidery:** the art of embroidering.  
**gallows:** a structure for the hanging of criminals.  
**gorgeous:** richly coloured, sumptuous, magnificent.  
**gown:** a long dress.  
**grisly:** causing horror, disgust, or fear.  
**haughty:** arrogantly self-admiring and disdainful.  
**heretofore:** before this time.  
**mien** /'mi:n/: a person's look or bearing, as

showing character or mood.  
**oak:** *chêne*.  
**pillory:** a wooden framework with holes for the head and hands, enabling the public to assault or ridicule a person so imprisoned.  
**redeem:** buy back; deliver from sin and damnation.  
**riotous:** disorderly, disruptive, unruly.  
**scaffold:** a raised wooden platform used for the execution of criminals.  
**scourge** /'skɜ:dʒ/: whip; punish, afflict, oppress.  
**sluggish:** inert, inactive, slow-moving, torpid, indolent.  
**staff:** a stick or pole as a sign of office or authority.  
**sumptuary:** regulating expenditure; (of a law) limiting private expenditure in the interests of the State.  
**sword** /'sɔ:d/: a weapon with a long blade.  
**thereby:** by that means; as a result of that.  
**thread** /e/: a spun-out filament of cotton, silk, etc; yarn.  
**token** /'tɔ:k ən/: symbol.  
**vie** /'vaɪ/: compete, strive for superiority.  
**whip:** *fouet*.  
**wink:** close and open one eye or both eyes quickly.  
**wrought:** *archaic past participle of work*.

## I. Questions.

1. Where and when is the action supposed to take place? What is the historical, social and political context of the story? *2 points*.
2. In “one token of her shame would but poorly serve to hide another” (l. 25), what does “one token” refer to? What does “another” refer to? What do you think “the letter A” (l. 29) means? What is Hester Prynne punished for? *2 points*.
3. Study the theatricality of the passage. *4 points*.
4. Study the imagery of the passage. (Please elaborate: your answer should be the occasion to study the treatment by the author of the themes and characters of the story.) *6 points*.
5. What image does the text give of the society in which the story is set? *6 points*.

## II. Translation.

Translate the text into French from “She bore in her arms” (l. 18) to “the letter A” (l. 29). *20 points*.