A novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne, published in 1850 and developed from an incident described by him in the story 'Endicott and the Red Cross' (1837).

An introductory section describes Hawthorne's work in the Custom House at Salem. The novel itself is set in 17th-century Boston, and opens as a young woman named Hester Prynne emerges from prison with her illegitimate baby in her arms. Charged with adultery, she must stand exposed on the public scaffold for three hours, and must thereafter wear a scarlet letter 'A' on her breast as a lifelong sign of her sin. Her husband is an elderly English scholar who two years earlier had sent her to Boston to prepare a home for them, but had failed to follow her at the appointed time. Unknown to Hester, he had been captured by Indians, and in fact arrives just in time to see his wife publicly condemned. Hester will not reveal the identity of her lover, try as the community does to draw out the secret. Ironically, the guilty man is one of that community's most respected figures, the young minister, Arthur Dimmesdale. A highly conscientious man, he escapes outward condemnation, but is inwardly tormented by sin.

Years pass and Hester settles into her new life. She proves to be a strong-minded and capable woman and, in spite of her humiliation, finds a place in Boston society by helping other unfortunates and outcasts. Her daughter, Pearl, has developed into a mischievous 'elfin' child who reminds Hester of her guilt by asking rather acute questions about the minister and the letter. Meanwhile, Hester's husband has taken the name Roger Chillingworth and has settled in Boston as a doctor. He makes Hester swear to keep his identity secret, and indulges his private obsession with finding the identity of her lover. Happening upon Hester, Pearl, and Dimmesdale speaking together one midnight, he guesses correctly at Dimmesdale's guilt. Aware that the minister's failing health is related to his unconfessed sin, Chillingworth pretends to help him medically, while torturing him spiritually with veiled allusions to his crime. Hester intercepts Arthur one day on a walk through the forest and begs him to escape with her to Europe. He would like to do so, and Hester even removes the letter from her breast, but he sees flight as yielding to further temptation. He returns to town, his mind filled with evil thoughts, to finish writing his Election Day Sermon. Hester learns that Chillingworth has blocked her plan of escape by booking passage on the same ship. Having delivered a powerful sermon, Dimmesdale leaves the church and bids Hester and Pearl to join him on the pillory, where at last he publicly confesses his sin. As Dimmesdale dies in his lover's arms, Chillingworth cries out in agony at having lost the sole object of his perverse life. Hester and Pearl, now free from the restraints of the mortified community, leave Boston. The book ends with Hester's return to Boston and her voluntary decision to resume wearing the scarlet letter. While Pearl settles in Europe, Hester continues her life of penance, a model of endurance, goodness and victory over sin.
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