



Unraveling Truths Through *The Scarlet Letter*

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Overview

In this lesson, students will explore the differences between the terms “evident” and “self-evident” to better understand the influence of the principles of the Declaration of Independence on the work of American authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne. Using interactive discussion and activities, this lesson provides a foundation for understanding the layered perspectives in Hawthorne’s work—namely, the way that his narrator from 19th-century Massachusetts portrays life in 17th-century Puritan New England. Engaging in the lesson’s learning activities will prompt students to think more deeply about language in the Declaration while discussing how its principles set the stage for robust literary conversation.

Note: This lesson is the 1st in a 4-lesson series.



Essential Questions

- How does Nathaniel Hawthorne use Hester's characterization to explore the principles of "equality," "unalienable rights," and "consent of the governed"?
- How does Hester's journey embody struggles over "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" within restrictive social systems?

Learning Objectives

- Analyze the text for key details that reveal the motivations and complexities of characters in *The Scarlet Letter*.
- Evaluate Nathaniel Hawthorne's narrator for reliability by considering how the 19th-century perspective shapes the portrayal of characters in *The Scarlet Letter*.
- Define evident and self-evident truths as related to the articulation in the Declaration of Independence.
- Differentiate between evident and self-evident truths as they relate to characters and discussing which truths in *The Scarlet Letter* appear more enduring or fragile.

Targeted Skills (AP Literature)

- **CHA 1.A.** Identify and describe what specific textual details reveal about a character, that character's perspective, and that character's motives.
- **CHA 1.D.** Describe how textual details reveal nuances and complexities in characters' relationships with one another.
- **NAR 4.D.** Explain how a narrator's reliability affects a narrative.
- **FIG 5.D.** Identify and explain the function of an image or imagery.

Materials

- Sphere Education's [Principles and Argument of the American Founding](#)
- *The Scarlet Letter*
- Excerpt from *The House of the Seven Gables*
- What's Going to Happen? Student Worksheet (see end of this lesson)
- Evident or Self-Evident? Student Worksheet (see end of this lesson)

Warm-Up

Give students this table of words related to *The Scarlet Letter*. Explain to students that each of these words is either a key character, object, or motivation that is important to the plot of the story.

Hester Prynne	The scaffold	A rosebush
Pearl	Dr. Roger Chillingworth	Reverend Dimmesdale
Revenge	Desire	Guilt
Shame	The letter "A"	A red cloak
A meteor	Governor Bellingham	Mistress Hibbins

Then ask students to write a story using all the words in the table. The goal of this activity is for students to predict what might happen while getting a sense of key words they should look for while reading. After students have written their story, have them keep it and tell them they will return to it later.

*Note: You can scaffold this activity for diverse learners by cutting out the words in the table and having pairs of students work together to physically arrange the words in a way that shows key markers of a story. Or, you can have small groups of students work together to cowrite a story using all the words from the table.

Lesson Activities

BEFORE READING

Ask students to define the word "romance" as it relates to literature and writing. After taking a few ideas, share this excerpt from the preface to Hawthorne's literary work *The House of the Seven Gables*.

When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume had he professed to be writing a Novel. The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience. The former—while, as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart—has fairly a right to

present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation.

Discuss Hawthorne's definition with students, stressing the idea that in Hawthorne's mind, a romance has latitude to "bend the truth" for a deeper, moral purpose (using symbols and other literary elements) while a novel does not have this freedom because it needs to maintain a fidelity to real, everyday life. Spark students' interest in determining whether *The Scarlet Letter* is a novel or a romance.

PROVIDE A PURPOSE

Explain to students that determining the genre of the story is a step toward figuring out the author's purpose. Another important step is determining what is "evident" about the setting and the community of *The Scarlet Letter*. If needed, dig a bit deeper into the definition and etymology of the word "evident." According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the word "evident" comes from the Latin *evident-*, *evidens*, which is from the root *videre*, which means "to see." In other words, what is "evident" is what a person can see or understand clearly.

As they read Chapters 1–6, have students pay attention to words, phrases, and images that portray something (or someone) being "seen" or something (or someone) being "unseen." Stress the importance of taking note of what Hawthorne makes visible for his readers so that he can set the stage for the rest of the story.

DURING READING

Have students read Chapters 1–6 of *The Scarlet Letter*. Consider having them read the introductory essay "The Custom House," which will give them insight into Hawthorne as a writer as he establishes the story's narration. However, the introductory essay is not crucial for engaging in this lesson.

Remind students to annotate passages that portray the idea of "seen" or "unseen" and to mark any details that give them new insights or information about the characters or setting of the story.

AFTER READING

Revisit with students this table of words related to *The Scarlet Letter*.

Hester Prynne	The scaffold	A rosebush
Pearl	Dr. Roger Chillingworth	Reverend Dimmesdale
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Ask them to take out their original writing about the story (from the Warm-Up) and reread what they wrote. Then have them independently answer the following questions.

- Now that you have read the first 6 chapters of *The Scarlet Letter*, what is evident to you that was not evident before? Give 3 examples using quotations from your original piece of writing and the text of *The Scarlet Letter*.
- What do you hope to find more evidence about as you continue reading? Why do you hope to find more evidence about that item or topic? Explain your thoughts in a well-written paragraph.

After all students have written their responses, ask them to share their thoughts with a partner or in a small group.

CONNECT

The goal of this section is to connect the layers of what students are learning about the Puritan setting of *The Scarlet Letter* (the mid-17th century), the Declaration of Independence (written in the latter part of the 18th century), and author Nathaniel Hawthorne (who lived and published in the mid-19th century). Putting these pieces together will help students see the relevance of Puritan New England to the necessity for developing the Declaration. It also should ensure that students are aware of the difference of more than a century between *The Scarlet Letter's* setting and Hawthorne's writing of the book.

STEP 1

Tell students that there was about a 150-year difference between the time that Hawthorne was writing (in the mid-19th century) and the setting of *The Scarlet Letter* (in the mid-17th century). As a class, make a list of all the events that happened between the mid-17th century in America and the publication of *The Scarlet Letter*. Write this shared list on the board or a piece of butcher paper so all students have access to it.

STEP 2

After you have generated a strong list of events, highlight the events that are related to the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence. Ask students to think about why these events were so momentous. What was different about the worldview of the Founding Fathers and the worldview of someone living in the American colonies of the 17th century?

DEFINE EVIDENT VERSUS SELF-EVIDENT TRUTHS

STEP 1

Bring students back to the idea (from the 2nd lesson in the unit) that the Declaration of Independence is foundational to understanding themes in American literature. Specifically point out the phrase “We hold these truths to be self-evident. . . .”

Put students in pairs or in small groups and ask them to discuss the following questions.

- What is the meaning of the term “self-evident”?

- What is the difference between something being “evident” and something being “self-evident”?

Guide students to understand that a key difference between these 2 terms is that an “evident” idea is one that necessarily includes proof or evidence while a “self-evident” idea is one in which its meaning is revealed in its parts. In other words, a self-evident truth relates to human dignity as something that cannot be given or taken away. It simply exists because a person is alive. *Note: If you want to dive more deeply into this, have students read (or reread) the “Self-Evident Truths” section of Sphere Education's [Principles and Argument of the American Founding](#).

STEP 2

Give each student a copy of the “Evident or Self-Evident?” student worksheet found at the end of this lesson. The table asks students to identify examples of truths that are evident versus truths that are self-evident in *The Scarlet Letter*. Tell them that each column should include an example from the text. Several examples of what students may identify are in the following table.

Evident Truth A truth that can be clearly observed or demonstrated through evidence	Self-Evident Truth A truth that is inherently obvious and does not require external proof
Hester's punishment of standing on the scaffold and wearing the letter "A" on her dress. This public shaming is something that can be visibly seen as the townspeople gather to see Hester and observe her humiliation.	Hester's ability to maintain dignity in the midst of her humiliation and suffering—specifically in Hawthorne's description of her standing on the scaffold. This is a representation of human dignity and the idea that because a person is alive, they have dignity. Being shamed cannot negate a person's dignity.
The gossip of the townspeople as they publicly wonder who Hester's lover is and discuss the shame that is amplified by Hester intricately embroidering the letter "A" so that it is beautiful. Their disdain and legalism is easily observed in these conversations.	Hester maintains personal dignity by making the "A" beautiful and representing the obvious truth that a person's humanity and dignity are beautiful and present no matter what.
Pearl is a child who behaves in wild and unpredictable ways. This behavior is clearly seen in public spaces and reinforces the idea that Pearl is a symbol of her mother's social rejection.	Despite her guilt and the townspeople's rejection of Pearl, Hester's love for her child shows the self-evident truth that Pearl holds a place of worth and dignity in her mother's eyes simply because she exists.

The prison and the scaffold are evident truths that are seen and observed by the townspeople in the first 6 chapters. Both places are sites of punishment, shame, and guilt.

The complexity of emotions is also present when Hester remembers her innocence in childhood while feeling shamed on the scaffold. Even so, Hester maintains her human dignity.

After students have completed the activity, ask several students to share their thoughts with the whole group.

Closing

To close the lesson, ask students to reflect on the following questions in a journal entry or on a digital document that they will be able to revisit.

- From *The Scarlet Letter* (Chapters 1–6), choose an “evident truth” believed by the Puritan community and a “self-evident truth” revealed through Hester or Pearl. Which of these truths seems most fragile and which seems enduring? Why?
- The Declaration of Independence begins with the phrase “We hold these truths to be self-evident. . . .” Why do you think Jefferson chose “self-evident” instead of simply “truths” or even just “evident truths?” How does this distinction affect your understanding of the Declaration?
- Imagine that *The Scarlet Letter* was written in the late 17th century. How would the setting, characters, or themes of that version be similar to or different from Hawthorne’s story, which was published 7 decades after the writing of the Declaration of Independence? What does this comparison tell you about the influence of the Declaration on the writing of American literature?

Student Worksheet

Hester Prynne	The scaffold	A rosebush
Pearl	Dr. Roger Chillingworth	Reverend Dimmesdale
Revenge	Desire	Guilt
Shame	The letter "A"	A red cloak
A meteor	Governor Bellingham	Mistress Hibbins

Evident or Self-Evident?

Student Worksheet

All the words below are a key character, object, or motivation in *The Scarlet Letter*. Create a storyline on this sheet, using all the words in the table. Do not leave any words out (even though you might not know who a character is or what the use of an object is) and give the storyline your best guess!

Evident Truth A truth that can be clearly observed or demonstrated through evidence	Self-Evident Truth A truth that is inherently obvious and does not require external proof