



SPHERE

Fostering Civil Discourse and Diverse Viewpoints for Every Classroom

Coming to Terms with Equality Through *The Scarlet Letter*

BY KOBI NELSON

Overview

In this lesson, students will compare and contrast Nathaniel Hawthorne's written work concerning 2 women: Hester Prynne and Anne Hutchinson. Contemplating his language, tone, and word choice, students will consider Hawthorne's perception of the phrase "all men are created equal" in relation to the meaning intended by the Founding Fathers. Students will write an analysis essay showing they can critically analyze and cognitively empathize with what they have read. They will draw conclusions and consider nuanced interpretations of Nathaniel Hawthorne's viewpoint in 2 texts by him. Finally, students will reflect on the ways that Hawthorne's writing is evidence of the difficulties applying the principles of the Declaration equally and universally at the time of the Founding and onward.

This lesson is the 2nd in a 4-lesson series.



Essential Questions

- How does 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

- Identify and describe specific details in a setting that contribute to the understanding of key characters in a text.
- Determine the extent to which the characterizations of Hester Prynne and Anne Hutchinson reflect the principle of equality in the Declaration of Independence.
- Develop a clear thesis statement that presents a strong claim about Hawthorne's interpretation of equality using evidence from his written work.
- Evaluate the impact of the Declaration of Independence on a work of American literature.

Targeted Skills (AP Literature)

- **CHA 1.C.** Explain the function of contrasting characters.
- **CHA 1.D.** Describe how textual details reveal nuances and complexities in characters' relationships with one another.
- **SET 2.B.** Explain the function of setting in a narrative.
- **FIG 5.D.** Identify and explain the function of an image or imagery.
- **LAN 7.B.** Develop a thesis statement that conveys a defensible claim about an interpretation of literature and may establish a line of reasoning.
- **LAN 7.C.** Develop commentary that establishes and explains relationships among textual evidence, the line of reasoning, and the thesis.

Materials

- Sphere Education's [Principles and Argument of the American Founding](#)
- *The Scarlet Letter*
- [Boston History in a Minute: Anne Hutchinson](#) video
- [Anne Hutchinson and Antinomian Crisis](#) video
- "Mrs. Hutchinson"
- Hawthorne and Hutchinson Student Worksheet (see end of lesson) – 1 per student
- Hester Prynne and Anne Hutchinson Student Worksheet (see end of lesson) – 1 per student

Warm-Up

Ask students to read (or reread) the "Equality" section of the [Principles and Argument of the American Founding](#).

After they have finished reading, give students the following prompts:

- What part of this reading did you find the most compelling? Why?
- What part of this reading did you find the most surprising? Why?
- What part of this reading are you unsure about? Why?

Have students discuss their answers to these questions with a partner.

Discuss the following questions with students to prompt their thinking about the role of the Declaration of Independence in providing a foundation for American literature.

- What does the phrase "that all men are created equal" mean to you? What did it mean to the Founding Fathers?
- Why has applying the principles of the Declaration of Independence "equally and universally" been a "source of significant conflict through the Founding era and beyond" as stated in the reading?
 - In your opinion, what effect has this challenge had on American literature?

Lesson Activities

BEFORE READING

STEP 1

Transition to the next activity by asking students why they think the main character of *The Scarlet Letter* is a woman. What was Hawthorne trying to accomplish with this?

Then explain that Hester is not the only woman Hawthorne wrote about. He also wrote about a woman in history named Anne Hutchinson, who emigrated to Boston in the 17th century.

STEP 2

Introduce Anne Hutchinson to students by watching [Boston History in a Minute: Anne Hutchinson](#) or [Anne Hutchinson and Antinomian Crisis](#), or both.

While they are watching, students should respond to the following questions.

- Where did Anne emigrate from?
- Why did she get into "trouble" with the Puritan leaders of the colony?
- How did Anne speak and present herself at her trial?
- What was the outcome of Anne's trial?

STEP 3

Debrief with the whole class to make sure everyone is on the same page regarding Anne Hutchinson.

BUILD BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

Give students a copy of Nathaniel Hawthorne's character sketch called "[Mrs. Hutchinson](#)" and ask them to read it individually or in pairs. Be sure to tell students that this piece was published 2 decades before *The Scarlet Letter*.

Then have each student complete a table with evidence from the text, using it to think about how Hawthorne viewed the historical figure of Anne Hutchinson. A student copy of this table is available at the end of this lesson. In the following table, you will find several examples of what students might write.

Quotation	What this quotation reveals about Hawthorne's viewpoint
"We will not look for a living resemblance of Mrs. Hutchinson, though the search might not be altogether fruitless. But there are portentous indications, changes gradually taking place in the habits and feelings of the gentle sex, which seem to threaten our posterity with many of these public women, whereof one was a burden too grievous for our fathers."	Hawthorne believes that society is changing, and women are changing in habit and feeling. In Hawthorne's view, women who are public figures are a problem for future generations just as it was a problem for his forefathers.
"The press, however, is now the medium through which feminine ambition chiefly manifests itself; and we will not anticipate the period . . . when fair orators shall be as numerous as the fair authors of our own day."	Hawthorne sees that women mainly engage in public life through writing and he does not look forward to the day when women will move beyond writing to speaking in public.
"Women's intellect should never give the tone to that of man; and even her morality is not exactly the material for masculine virtue."	Hawthorne thinks that women's thoughts should not guide men's thoughts and that the thoughts and moral sentiments of men and women should remain separate.

"Mrs. Hutchinson was a woman of extraordinary talent and strong imagination. . . . she was drawn in by the great tide of Puritan emigration, and visited Massachusetts within a few years after its first settlement. But she bore trouble in her own bosom, and could find no peace in this chosen land. She soon began to promulgate strange and dangerous opinions, tending, in the peculiar situation of the colony, and from the principles which were its basis . . . to eat into its very existence."

Hawthorne views Anne Hutchinson as a smart, talented woman who was troubled and brought strange ideas to Massachusetts. By sharing her "dangerous" ideas, Hawthorne believes that she was contributing to the demise of the colony.

DISCUSS

Divide students into small groups and ask them to discuss the following questions:

- What does this sketch reveal about Hawthorne's opinion of Anne Hutchinson?
- How does Hawthorne characterize Anne and what are similarities and differences between the way he characterizes female characters in *The Scarlet Letter*?
- Considering your responses to the previous 2 questions, what do you believe are Hawthorne's views about women?
- Why do you think this?
- When thinking about Hawthorne's viewpoints, do you think it makes a difference to note when Hawthorne published the Hutchinson sketch and *The Scarlet Letter*? Explain your thinking.

After students have finished their conversations, debrief as a whole class.

DURING READING

Have students read Chapters 7–12 of *The Scarlet Letter*. While they are reading, they should identify any literary element (setting, characterization, figurative language, symbols, etc.) that reminds them of Hawthorne's sketch of Mrs. Hutchinson.

Remind students to annotate their text with questions and mark any details that give them new insights or information about the characters or setting of the story.

AFTER READING

Once students have read Chapters 7–12, revisit Hawthorne's description of the trial scene with Anne Hutchinson in his sketch "Mrs. Hutchinson." Divide students into small groups and give them the following table. Have students compare the description of Anne's trial in "Mrs. Hutchinson" to Chapters (Ch) 7 and 8 of *The Scarlet Letter* and record the similarities and differences. A student copy is available at the end of the lesson. The information that follows is included for your reference but does not contain all possible student responses.

	Ch 7–8 of <i>The Scarlet Letter</i>	Description of the trial in “Mrs. Hutchinson”
Characters and Characterization	Hester—enters Bellingham's home as if “she was a great lady in the land” even though the house servant said she could not come in. (Ch 7)	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.
Setting	Bellingham's home—“The brilliancy might have befitted Aladdin's palace, rather than the mansions of the grave old Puritan ruler.” (Ch 7)	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.
Narrator/ Narration	The narrator (not Hawthorne but an unnamed person who seems similar to him) gives us some description of the characters and setting and allows us to draw our own conclusions through dialogue between characters.	The narrator is Hawthorne himself and there is no dialogue between characters. Like a sketched-out drawing, the narration is full of Hawthorne's impressions, which are not favorable toward Anne.
Figurative Language	“a lonely woman, backed by the sympathies of nature, on the other—Hester Prynne set forth from her solitary cottage.” (Ch 7) Pearl says “she had not been made at all, but had been plucked by her mother off the bush of wild roses, that grew by the prison door.” (Ch 8) “Pearl—that wild and flighty little elf” (Ch 8)	“deceived by the strange fire now laid upon the altar” “feel like children who have been enticed far from home” “flash of carnal pride half hidden in her eye” “agitated by none of the tumultuous billows which were left swelling behind her we may suppose that in the stillness of Nature, her heart was stilled”

Then give each group the following questions to discuss:

- What traits do Hester and Anne Hutchinson share? In what ways do they differ?
- How are the reactions of others to Hester and Anne similar or different in these 2 texts?
- In what ways does the tone of the narration in each text affect your mental image of each woman?
- To what extent do Hawthorne's word choices and figurative language affect you positively or negatively as the reader?

WHOLE GROUP DEBRIEF

Return to the principle in the Declaration of Independence "that all men are created equal." Ask students the following questions:

- If you were to go back in time and ask Nathaniel Hawthorne if he believed "that all men are created equal," what do you think he would say? What would you say in response?
- Do you think that Hawthorne's writing (in both *The Scarlet Letter* and "Mrs. Hutchinson") reflects the principle "that all men are created equal" as intended by the Founding Fathers? Why or why not?

WRITE

Give students the following essay prompt and ask them to write their response on a physical or digital document. *Note: This essay will be a way for you to assess their ability to both critically analyze and cognitively empathize with these 2 texts by Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Essay Prompt:

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and his sketch "Mrs. Hutchinson," both Hester Prynne and Anne Hutchinson navigate the complexities of individuality and societal judgment within a Puritanical society. Your task is to analyze how Hawthorne interprets the theme of equality through his descriptions of these 2 characters. Is Hawthorne sympathetic to the idea of equality as outlined by the Founding Fathers?

Instructions

- Develop a clear thesis statement that presents a defensible claim about Hawthorne's interpretation of equality as it relates to the experiences of Hester and Anne. Consider how Hawthorne's writing reflects or challenges the ideals of equality articulated by the Founding Fathers in the Declaration of Independence.
- Use relevant and sufficient textual evidence from both *The Scarlet Letter* and "Mrs. Hutchinson" to support your analysis.
- Establish a logical line of reasoning that connects your evidence back to your thesis statement.

Considerations:

- Think about how Hawthorne's personal history and societal influences shaped his ideas. (Remember that he wrote *The Scarlet Letter* 20 years after "Mrs. Hutchinson.")
- Consider specific language from the Declaration to uncover the writers' intentions and beliefs regarding the word "equality."
- Reflect on your own experiences and how they inform your understanding of the document.

Closing

In closing, ask for students to reflect on the ways that Hawthorne's writing shows that applying the principles of the Declaration of Independence "equally and universally" has been a "source of significant conflict through the Founding era and beyond." If there is time, allow a few students to share their thoughts with the class.

Hawthorne and Hutchinson

Student Worksheet

After reading Nathaniel Hawthorne's character sketch titled "Mrs. Hutchinson," complete this table. Write out full quotations from the text and explain what each quotation reveals about Hawthorne's perception of Anne Hutchinson.

Quotation	What this quotation reveals about Hawthorne's viewpoint

Hester Prynne and Anne Hutchinson

Student Worksheet

Complete this table using evidence from “Mrs. Hutchinson” and Chapters 7–8 of *The Scarlet Letter*. Include examples from each text, using direct quotations or clear paraphrasing. Then use the blank lines at the end to explain the similarities and differences between the texts in your own words.

Literary Device	Ch 7–8 of The Scarlet Letter	Description of the trial in “Mrs. Hutchinson”
Characters and Characterization		
Setting		
Narrator/ Narration		
Figurative Language		

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES