

The Scarlet Letter Study Guide

Dig Deeper:

10. Read Isaiah 42:1–3, 50:4–6, and 53:1–7, three sections of Isaiah that describe the “suffering servant.” Compare these passages with Hawthorne’s description of Hester in the second and third paragraphs of Chapter 13. What might Hawthorne be saying about Hester by drawing such a close comparison?

11. There are two pictures of Hester in Chapter 13. In one she is described as having “blameless purity,” being “warm and rich; a well-spring of human tenderness . . . a Sister of Mercy. . . . Such helpfulness was found in her,—so much power to do, and power to sympathize,— . . . so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman’s strength.” In the other, she is described as “marble coldness”: “All the light and graceful foliage of her character had been withered up by this red-hot brand, and had long ago fallen away, leaving a bare and harsh outline, which might have been repulsive. . . . Some attribute had departed from her, the permanence of which had been essential to keep her a woman.” How do you reconcile these two contradictory descriptions?

12. In Chapter 13, Hawthorne says Hester is not accustomed “to measure her ideas of right and wrong by any standard external to herself,” and “The world’s law was no law for her mind.” Read Judges 17:6, 21:25 and random portions of Judges. During the time of the Judges, how were the Israelites like Hester? From your spot readings in Judges, how well did the Israelites’ moral code work for them? Why might this subjective morality lead to error?