

*Using
Bloom's Taxonomy to
Explore Literature*

Levels of Understanding



The Scarlet Letter
By Nathaniel Hawthorne

written by Jill Clare



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Introduction to Levels of Understanding

FOR MANY STUDENTS, studying literature is like being lost in an alien universe, filled with hidden symbols, structures, and meanings that only a scholar can uncover. Without a teacher's direction, students lack the skills and confidence to evaluate a work of literature on their own, and instead, will frequently turn to resources such as the Internet for guidance. As a result, they assume another writer's views instead of developing their own.

Levels of Understanding breaks down complex questions students will encounter into smaller parts, showing the steps a critical reader should take in order to develop a sound evaluation of a text. Each section of the guide contains five types of questions representative of Bloom's learning domains—starting with the most basic and foundational skill, knowledge and comprehension, and gradually building to the highest skill, evaluation. All the way, reluctant students are provided with the scaffolding they need to advance from one level of understanding to the next.

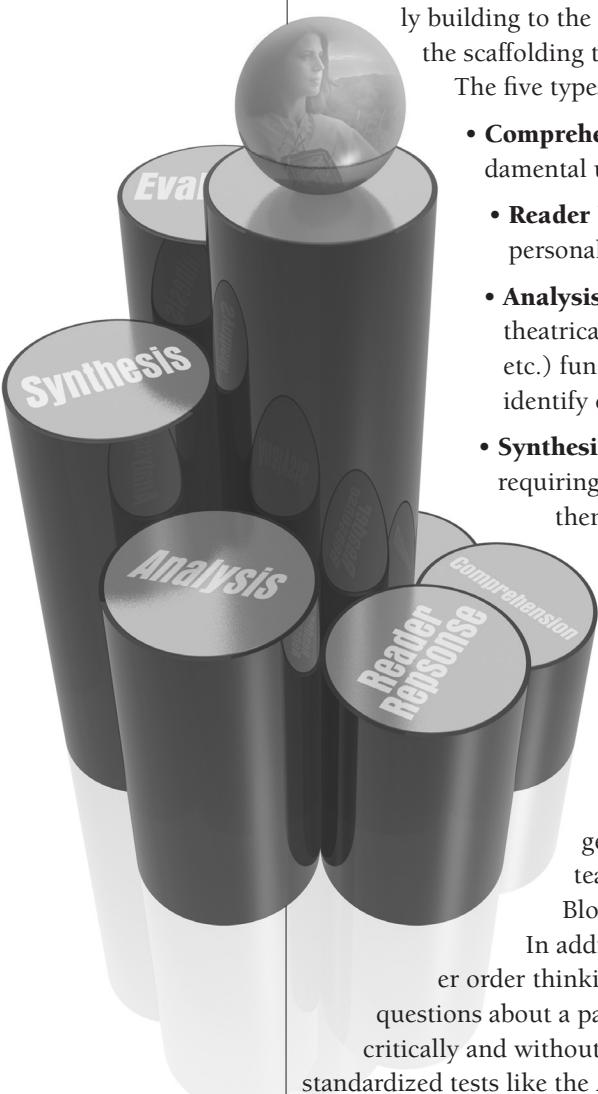
The five types of questions, again, representative of Blooms domains, are as follows:

- **Comprehension**—will ask the most basic questions to ascertain the students' fundamental understanding of the text: plot facts, character identification, etc.
- **Reader Response**—will ask the students to "respond" to the text by relating it to personal experience or by presenting an opinion on a character or event.
- **Analysis**—will require students to study how various techniques and literary or theatrical devices (diction, symbolism, imagery, metaphors, asides, soliloquies etc.) function in the text. Analysis questions do not ask the student to merely identify or define a literary, theatrical, or rhetorical device.
- **Synthesis**—will bridge the gap between the analysis and evaluation questions, requiring students to look at other scenes in the text and draw conclusions about themes, motifs, or a writer's style. Often, a synthesis question will require the student to draw on prior knowledge—what has been learned in class or through research—and/or information from sources other than the literary title being studied in order to arrive at a satisfactory answer.
- **Evaluation**—will ask the student to make a qualitative judgment on the text and determine whether a particular aspect of it is effective or ineffective.

Other books may list Bloom's taxonomy, define the terms, and offer a general example or two. *Levels of Understanding*, however, provides the teacher with the title-specific questions to allow you to effectively bring Bloom into your classroom.

In addition, unlike other available products that claim to address Bloom's "higher order thinking skills," *Levels of Understanding* does not teach students how to answer questions about a particular text, but instead, helps them develop skills to evaluate literature critically and without guidance. These are skills that will not only help students prepare for standardized tests like the Advanced Placement Language and Literature exams, the SATs, and the ACTs, but will also give students the self-assurance to develop and articulate a personal view—a skill that will be highly advantageous to them in college.

This product, however, is not geared toward upper-level students only, but is a versatile guide that can be used for students of all ability levels—remedial through honors. The teacher may customize the product to fit the class's objectives and goals, determining which questions the students will answer. Additionally, the guide is entirely reproducible, and each major division begins on a new page, so you may use *Levels of Understanding* for the whole work of literature or only a specific section. ☺



How to Use this Unit

EACH LEVELS OF UNDERSTANDING: USING BLOOM'S TAXONOMY TO EXPLORE LITERATURE unit is intended to be a deep and rich component of your literature program, whether your goal is to prepare your students for a large-scale assessment like the AP Literature exam or to challenge your students to read carefully and to think deeply about what they have read.

The questions in this guide are designed to be flexible and meet your needs. They can be used as

- homework questions when students read the text independently.
- in-class reading check questions and “bell-ringer” journal entries.
- class discussion questions and prompts.
- focus questions for pre-writing and essay planning.
- review and study questions for assessment.

While the Teacher’s Guide contains an answer key, you will find that the higher-order questions (especially synthesis and evaluation) have model answers that represent more than one possible response. It would be inappropriate to penalize a student whose well-reasoned and supportable answer did not match the “correct” answer in the guide.

For this reason, we strongly recommend that you view the questions in this guide as learning activities and not as assessment activities.

Many of your students are likely to find the higher domains new and perhaps intimidating. Others might be alarmed at having to support their reader-response reactions and their evaluations with an accurate comprehension of the text. The questions in this guide should act as both scaffolding and safety net, guiding your students through a new reading and thinking process and allowing them to practice without fear of “failure.”

The writing prompts, however, provide rich assessment and evaluation opportunities. Every prompt is designed to invite your students to operate in one of the higher order domains, thus giving students the opportunity to demonstrate their ability, and giving you the opportunity to evaluate their progress.

Whether you use *Levels of Understanding: Using Bloom's Taxonomy to Explore Literature* as the core of your literature curriculum or as a supplement, the guide and writing prompts are designed to help your students attain a deep understanding of the works they read. Ideally, they will gain the type of understanding demanded by Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and most state standards, including the Common Core State Standards of the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association. ☺



Background Information

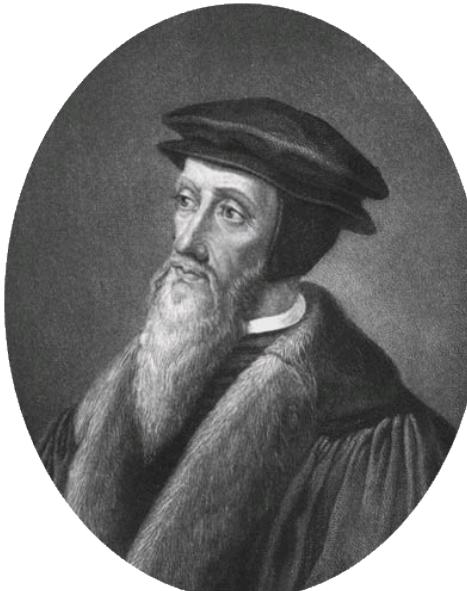
A. Background on Puritan beliefs

THE PURITAN RELIGION HAS ITS beginnings in the Protestant movement, started in 1517 by a German monk named Martin Luther. Martin Luther effectively began the turbulent movement called the Protestant Reformation, which was a reaction to the doctrine and traditions of the Catholic Church. As the Protestant movement grew and spread, believers split into denominations based on differences of opinion and belief. The Puritan movement grew from Calvinism, a Protestant branch that preached predestination and the total depravity of man.

The Puritans wholeheartedly accepted these beliefs, especially man's depravity. The belief in the total depravity of man is linked to the idea of Original Sin, the belief that men are born with an irresistible tendency to sin and defy the will of God. Even with the best of intentions, no man can lead a sinless life. In fact, in comparison to the ideal life of purity, every human being is depraved. In the light of this belief, Dimmesdale's words to his congregation are not shocking or even unusual. In Chapter 11, Dimmesdale tells his congregation how sinful and depraved he is. "He had told his hearers that he was altogether vile, a viler companion of the vilest, the worst of sinners, an abomination, a thing of unimaginable iniquity; and that the only wonder was, that they did not see his wretched body shriveled up before their eyes, by the burning wrath of the Almighty!"

Puritans, in the Protestant tradition, adhered strongly to the belief known as "the priesthood of all believers." At its core, this belief asserts that all members of the church share the same ability and responsibility to commune with God. Unlike Catholic tradition—to which the "priesthood of all believers" reacts—no priest or other clergy member is required to act as an intermediary for the believer, according to this doctrine. Each believer may, and is encouraged to, pray to God himself, rather than requiring a clergyman to do so for him. However, this does not mean that Puritanism rejected the importance of the clergy. Rather, the clergy were a respected, revered group of men, well educated on the scriptures and in a position to help lead and counsel their congregations.

In the same vein, Puritans (along with members of other Protestant groups of the time), encouraged literacy among



John Calvin

the congregation. Because of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, Puritans highly valued the ability to read the Bible for themselves, rather than having it read to them. In fact, Puritans believed that the scriptures were the revealed word of God, and that God revealed himself *only* through the scriptures, making the ability of the believer to read the Bible paramount. However, this emphasis on literacy became a double-edged sword. As members of the congregation could read the scriptures for themselves, some members began to interpret the meaning of the scriptures for themselves as well. These differing interpretations led to different beliefs and heresies, resulting in trials against heresy (as in Anne Hutchinson's trial).

What distinguished the Puritans of New England most from mem-

bers of other Protestant denominations was the structure of the congregations. Each congregation was autonomous, establishing power with local congregations rather than an ultimate hierarchy like the Catholic Church. Along with these self-governing congregations came a close-knit community within the congregation, as the members of the semi-democratic system worked together to elect their own church officials. Because the congregations were so tightly knit, both socially and by religious doctrine, any sin that threatened the cohesion of the community or the congregation was punished in order to maintain stability.

Puritans were also strict in their allowances of celebrations. While not completely ascetic, the Puritans rejected most religious celebrations that other denominations enjoyed. Puritans, for instance, refused to celebrate Christmas, as they found no scripture in the Bible justifying its celebration. Nonetheless, Puritans did enjoy occasional public festivals, such as the Election Day celebration in *The Scarlet Letter*.

I. Puritan punishments for adultery

Adultery was a serious crime in Puritan society of the 1600s, at the time of the setting of *The Scarlet Letter*. Despite strict laws and beliefs about the sins of fornication outside of marriage, adultery was not unheard of in Puritan communities. Because it was a crime that supposedly threatened the stability of the community and indicated great sin, punishments were harsh.

In 1644, two people were hanged for adultery. James

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to explore Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*

Writing Prompts

Section One: The Custom-House: Comprehension, Analysis

Choose one of the officers of the Custom-House that the narrator describes. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze the narrator's characterization of the officer you have selected and explain what this characterization reveals about the narrator's attitude toward the Custom-House. Support your essay with references to the text, but avoid plot summary.

Section Two: Chapter 1, 2, and 3: Analysis, Synthesis

In a well-organized essay, first analyze how Chapters 1 and 2 of *The Scarlet Letter* begin to establish a contrast between nature and civilization, and then explain how this contrast develops a common Romantic theme (or themes) in the text.

Section Three: Chapters 4, 5 and 6: Analysis, Synthesis

The parable of the pearl is a well-known parable from the New Testament. It reads:

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it" (Matthew 13:45-46).

In a well-organized essay, first analyze how Hester's daughter is likened to the pearl of great price, and then explain how this comparison serves to develop her character.

Section Four: Chapters 7, 8 and 9: Analysis, Evaluation

Examine the descriptions of the governor's mansion and garden in these chapters. Then, in a well-organized essay, explain how these descriptions cast doubt upon the sincerity of the Puritan way of life and determine the extent to which the narrator effectively establishes this doubt.

Section Five: Chapters 10, 11 and 12: Comprehension, Analysis

Dimmesdale's mysterious illness is explored in depth in this section. In a well-organized essay, first examine how the narrator conflates Dimmesdale's illness with his hidden sin, then explain what this reveals about the narrator's notion of the effects of sin and secrecy.

Section Six: Chapters 13, 14, and 15: Analysis, Synthesis

In a well-organized essay, analyze the conversation between Hester and Chillingworth in Chapter 14 and compare it to the conversation that takes place in Chapter 4. How has Hester's tone and attitude toward Chillingworth changed? How is this indicative of the evolution of her character?

Section Seven: Chapters 16, 17, and 18: Comprehension, Analysis, Synthesis

In Chapter 17, Dimmesdale speaks of his secret torment:

"There is no substance in it! It is cold and dead, and can do nothing for me! Of penance I have had enough! Of penitence there has been none! Else, I should long ago have thrown off these garments of mock holiness, and have shown myself to mankind as they will see me at the judgment-seat. Happy are you, Hester, that wear the scarlet letter openly upon your bosom! Mine burns in secret!"

In a well-organized essay, analyze how Dimmesdale's distinctions between penance and penitence and between openness and secrecy contribute to the theme of sin and its consequences. Avoid plot summary.

Section Eight: Chapters 19, 20, and 21: Comprehension, Analysis

In a well-organized essay, analyze how the narrator characterizes the Puritans in the marketplace. How does he use their descendants and their ancestors to establish their characteristics? What does this characterization suggest about his attitude toward the Puritans as a whole?

Section Nine: Chapters 22, 23, and 24: Analysis, Synthesis, Evaluation

Before Dimmesdale delivers his Election Sermon, Hester tells Pearl: "We must not always talk in the market-place of what happens to us in the forest." In a well-organized essay, analyze the importance of the settings of the marketplace and the forest in the novel. How does the setting impact the choices the characters make?

Total Novel: Comprehension, Synthesis, Evaluation

"The Custom-House" differs very much in tone and content from the story that follows it, but is nonetheless an important part of *The Scarlet Letter*. In a well-organized



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SECTION ONE: THE CUSTOM-HOUSE

Comprehension

1. What is the current state of the business in the Custom-House?

2. What does the narrator believe his ancestors would think of his profession as a writer?

3. What is the narrator's overall attitude toward the other officers at the Custom-House?

4. What does the narrator find in the second story of the Custom-House?

5. Why is the narrator unable to write?

6. What is the narrator's attitude toward losing his position in the Custom-House?

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SECTION THREE: CHAPTERS 4, 5, AND 6

Comprehension

- 1. How does Chillingworth know Hester? How does he plan to seek revenge?**

- 2. Why does Hester choose to remain in Boston, even when she is free to live anywhere she may choose?**

- 3. What sort of garments is Hester never commissioned to sew, despite her skill at embroidery?**

- 4. What sixth sense does Hester sometimes think the scarlet letter gives her?**

- 5. How do the other children react to Pearl? How does Pearl react to them?**

- 6. What is “the very first thing” that Pearl becomes aware of as an infant?**

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SECTION FIVE: CHAPTERS 10, 11, AND 12

Comprehension

1. Why does Dimmesdale fail to recognize Chillingworth as his enemy?

2. According to Dimmesdale, why do some men refuse to confess their sins to their fellow man?

3. To whom does the narrator liken Chillingworth, after Chillingworth sees Dimmesdale's chest?

4. Why is Dimmesdale such a powerful speaker and so popular with his congregation?

5. Where do Hester, Pearl, and Dimmesdale meet in the middle of the night? How did this meeting come to take place?

6. What does the meteor in the sky signify to Dimmesdale? What does it signify to his congregation?

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SECTION SEVEN: CHAPTERS 16, 17, AND 18

Comprehension

1. Why does Hester choose to meet Dimmesdale in the forest?

2. What does Hester tell Pearl in response to Pearl's questions about the Black Man?

3. Dimmesdale says that there is someone whose sin is worse than his or Hester's. To whom is he referring? Why does he say this?

4. What reasons does Dimmesdale give for deciding to leave with Hester?

5. What happens to the atmosphere in the forest after Hester removes the letter and lets her hair out of its cap?

Reader Response

1. Should Dimmesdale have forgiven Hester for neglecting to tell him about Chillingworth's true identity?

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SECTION NINE: CHAPTERS 22, 23, AND 24

Comprehension

1. Why does a “dreary influence” come over Hester when she sees Dimmesdale marching in the procession?

2. Describe Dimmesdale’s sermon.

3. How does Dimmesdale’s physical state suddenly change after he has delivered his Election Sermon?

4. What are the various explanations the spectators give for the origin of the mark on Dimmesdale’s chest?

5. What becomes of Chillingworth after Dimmesdale’s death?

6. What becomes of Pearl and Hester?
