

The Scarlet Letter
Fishbowl Discussion



Expectations

In a fishbowl, you are either a **FISH** (you are inside the circle, discussing) or you are an **OBSERVER** (you are observing the “fish” from the outside of the circle).



FISH

When it's your turn to discuss, you will earn points if

- 1) you are a regular participant in your group (speak at least five times),
- 2) you make focused comments beyond “I agree” or “you’re wrong,”
- 3) **you provide specific examples from the text and from life to support your points,**
- 4) you are respectful of others’ opinions and their right to speak,
- 5) you ask follow-up questions to keep the conversation going & to make your group members go deeper into the conversation.



OBSERVERS

You are responsible for the following tasks when you are an observer:

- 1) Use the criteria above to help rate other groups’ discussions.
- 2) Answer the questions on the “Observations Feedback form” to provide feedback to the group.
- 3) If you talk, text, sleep, or otherwise distract anyone during group discussions, points will be deducted from your own score

Written Portion – 50 points

Compose a written reflection that answers the questions of your group. This reflection is *informal* writing, and does not need to be typed. **It can quote the book, but that is not a requirement, as I expect that you will quote the book in your fishbowl discussion.** Your answers should show the kind of prior contemplation you’d ideally be putting into the discussion, so think of this as a “what I’d say if I had every opportunity to make every point I wanted to make.” There is not a minimum page requirement, but a thoughtful, hand-written reflection will probably not be less than two pages. You can, of course, type this up too. ☺

The written portion is intended as preparation for your fishbowl; it is *due at the end of the period on the day you go.*

Fishbowl Discussion Participation – 50 points

Discussions 1 & 2: Tuesday, January 6, 2015

Discussions 3 & 4: Wednesday, January 7, 2014 (continued on Thursday, 1/8)

Discussion #1: What is Hawthorne trying to teach his readers about sin in *The Scarlet Letter*?

- Who gets to define what a sin is in the novel’s society? Should the characters (and should we) accept that definition, or is it personal? Today, who determines what a sin is and isn’t?
- If Hester and Dimmesdale truly loved one another, and Hester and Chillingworth did not, was Hester and Dimmesdale’s relationship a sin?
- Who is *most* to blame for all of the tragic events of the book—Chillingworth for being an unfit husband from the start, Hester for cheating on her husband, or Dimmesdale for keeping his sin a secret?
- Is public humiliation an effective tool for atoning for one’s sins?
- Should politicians, celebrities, and other public figures be called to account for their personal lives? Must they be role models?

Discussion #2: What is Hawthorne trying to teach his readers about guilt in *The Scarlet Letter*?

- How and why does guilt cripple Dimmesdale and Chillingworth and inform their behavior? How does guilt affect Hester?
- Which is worse in your opinion—Dimmesdale’s affair with a married woman or his hypocrisy as a priest for keeping his sin a guilty secret?
- Judging by the book, which is worse—public humiliation or private, inner shame? Which is more noble?
- What solutions does Hawthorne offer for getting over or dealing with guilt over time? Are these solutions realistic, extreme, or just lame?
- Given Chillingworth’s lack of a true conscience and Dimmesdale’s faltering one, according to Hawthorne, how important is one’s conscience to one’s character?

Discussion #3: What is Hawthorne trying to teach his readers about judging other people in *The Scarlet Letter*?

- Which sin does *Hawthorne* seem to be most critical of—Hester’s adultery, Dimmesdale’s hypocrisy, or Chillingworth’s vengeance?
- How does judgment transform Hester? Consider both how she is judged by the town and by Chillingworth, and how she judges others. Is this transformation realistic and/or wholly positive?
- Who is worse—Chillingworth for remorselessly trying to ruin Dimmesdale’s soul, or Dimmesdale for trying to remain the perfect, blameless minister in his congregation’s eyes?
- Is Hester really a “brazen hussy” as the townspeople call her? Which is worse—her sin, or the town’s judgment of her?
- Does the government have the right to make laws controlling private behavior or to punish private behavior?
- How much do the characters base their actions on the judgments of others? How much should they, and how much should we as a modern society?
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Discussion #4: What does the novel tell us about the values of the time period in which Hawthorne wrote it (1850), the time period in which the novel is set (late 1600s – early 1700s), and our own values today (if I have to tell you what year it is, I’m a little concerned for your well-being)?

- Did Hawthorne intend for his readers to impose current values on the people in the story, or judge them by the morals of their time?
- Is Hester a good parent by 1700s standards? By Hawthorne’s standards, as far as he is the one portraying Hester’s parenting? By today’s standards?
- Who takes better care of whom—Hester of Pearl, or Pearl of Hester? Which society understands single-parenthood best – 1700s or today? (Remember, due to a much higher mortality rate before the 20th century, there were plenty of one-parent households back then also.)
- How do you feel about Hawthorne’s choices for the novel’s conclusion? How would *you* have ended it?
- Does the media have the right to condemn celebrities for their behavior?
- How do the values of 2012 compare to those on display in *The Scarlet Letter* (whether those of the 1700s or of 1850)?
- As Americans, are we still affected by the stringent laws and judgment of our Puritan ancestors? That is to say, does their belief system still have an influence on our moral codes today? How?

FISHBOWL OBSERVER FEEDBACK FORM

Discussion # _____ Fish you are observing: _____ Your name: _____

Write down your informal observations below. Note the number of times someone speaks and what he/she says, if asked. Also pay attention for whether or not he/she references the book.

Post-Discussion

Answer the following questions AFTER the discussion is over.

- 1.) Who is this fishbowl's MVP (most valuable participant) and why?

- 2.) Who is this fishbowl's most "under the radar" fish and why? (Ex. maybe it's somebody who doesn't say a lot, but when he or she does, they really move the discussion to a deeper level...)

- 3.) What was the most thought-provoking comment made by somebody in this fishbowl?

- 4.) What do you wish you could have said if you were in this fishbowl?

- 5) How did your fish do? Explain.

Name: _____ Date: _____ Discussion # _____

Fishbowl Self-Evaluation Form

Directions: After your discussion is over, reflect on your performance and complete this form. **STAPLE IT TO YOUR WRITING PORTION AND TURN IT IN.**

Rate yourself, fish!

1.) Were you a regular participant?

Circle one:	2	1	0
	Spoke three times or more	Spoke once or twice	Did not speak

2) Did you make focused comments?

Circle one:	2	1	0
	Always	Most of the time	Not so much

3) Did you provide specific examples to support your points?

Circle one:	2	1	0
	Of course, almost every time I spoke	Yeah, a few times	Not so much

4) Were you respectful of others' opinions, and did you allow them their right to speak?

Circle one:	2	1	0
	I was always respectful.	I was mostly respectful.	I was a fishbowl shark.

5) Did you ask follow-up questions to keep the conversation going deeper?

Circle one:	2	1	0
	Yes, in fact I did twice or more.	Yep, once.	Nope.

Is there anything else you would have liked to have added to your fishbowl but just didn't say? (Here's your chance to make up a few points you missed for not speaking).

Scarlet Letter
Fishbowl Discussion Group Sign-up

TUESDAY, JAN. 07, 2014

Discussion #1- Sin

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

Discussion #2 – Guilt

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

WEDNESDAY, JAN. 08, 2013

Discussion #3 - Judgement

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

Discussion #4 - Values

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

ALTERNATIVE ASSIGNMENT

What do I do if I wasn't in Honors last semester, and haven't read *The Scarlet Letter*?

Fishbowl Participation – 50 points

You will be an OBSERVER and offer feedback to the “fish” participating in discussion. Therefore, it is important for you to be IN CLASS on the days of the FB discussions AND to fill out the feedback forms with integrity. Be as helpful and observant as possible. If you miss class, you will miss 10 points for each discussion you cannot evaluate.

Written Portion – 50 points

You will write responses to adapted questions based on the topics below. You are doing this in place of the regular written portion of the assignment. Please answer the prompts for TWO of the discussion topics. If you can't write a whole two pages on these you can write on the other topics as well.

Topic 1 - Sin...

- a. Today, who determines what a sin is and isn't? And should we, as individuals, accept that definition? Or is it personal?
- b. Consider this situation. Hailey is married to Carl. Carl went missing over 2 years ago; we presume he is dead. While still technically married, Hailey has a relationship with Dante, effectively committing adultery. If Hailey and Dante truly loved one another, and Hailey and Carl (the first husband) did NOT, is Hailey and Dante's relationship a sin?
- c. Is public humiliation an effective tool for atoning for one's sins?
- d. Should politicians, celebrities, and other public figures be called to account for their personal lives? Must they be role models?

Topic 2 - Guilt...

- e. Which is worse in your opinion—Dimmesdale's affair with a married woman or his hypocrisy as a priest for keeping his sin a guilty secret?
- f. Which is worse: public humiliation or private, inner shame? Which is more noble? Give me some examples from real life, of people who've shown both public humiliation or had to live with private shame.

Topic 3 - Judging others...

- g. Does the government have the right to make laws controlling private behavior or to punish private behavior? (Think about it this way: do we have any laws like this now?...think DCFS and kids).
- h. As a modern society, how much do we base our actions on the judgments of others?

Topic 4 - Values...

- i. What makes a good parent?
- j. Which society understands “single-parenthood” more—society of the 1700s, or today's society?
- k. How do the values of 2014 compare to those of the Puritans?
- l. As Americans, are we still affected by the stringent laws and judgement of our Puritan ancestors? That is to say, does their belief system still have an influence on our moral codes today? How?