

Lori Laitman (b. 1955)
The Scarlet Letter (2008, rev. 2015–16)

Opera in Two Acts
Libretto by David Mason (b. 1954)

Based on the novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–64)
Commissioned by The University of Central Arkansas through Robert Holden and the UCA Opera Program

Cast in order of vocal appearance

A Sailor Charles Eaton, Baritone
A Farmer Benjamin Werley, Tenor
Goodwife 1 Emily Robinson, Soprano
John Wilson, an elder minister Kyle Knapp, Tenor
Governor Bellingham Daniel Belcher, Baritone
Arthur Dimmesdale, a young minister Dominic Armstrong, Tenor
Congregation Leader William Bryan, Baritone
Goodwife 2 Becky Bradley, Soprano
Goodwife 3 Danielle Lombardi, Mezzo-soprano
Roger Chillingworth, Hester's long-missing husband Malcolm MacKenzie, Baritone
Hester Prynne, a young seamstress Laura Claycomb, Soprano
Mistress Hibbons, a witch Margaret Gawrysiak, Mezzo-soprano
A Shipmaster William Bryan, Baritone
Pearl, Hester's daughter Maiah Howie (non-speaking role)

CD 1

Act One

[1] Scene One

It is June. Lights rise on a common in old Boston, a space serving as marketplace and green. On one side the hulking jailhouse where, surprisingly, a blooming rosebush thrives. Next to the jailhouse door, steps rise to a scaffold about shoulder height. Across the open space a community meeting house rises. It too has steps outside it, leading to a balcony that is significantly higher than the scaffold. With an aura of excited anticipation, townspeople gather in the space between these two edifices, most of them dressed for laboring, a few with the dark tunics and broad white collars of the seventeenth century Puritan.

A SAILOR
Over the teeming sea we sailed.
Out of the secret woods we carved
a settlement for man and God.

A FARMER
Good is the land we cleared for Him.
Free from the lash, the stranger's law.
Into the light of God we come.

SAILOR
Mark how the town has taken form.

FARMER
Mark how the will of God has farmed
from Governor to lowest worm.

The dignitaries have begun to gather on the meeting house balcony, including Governor Bellingham in his finery, the elder minister John Wilson, and the pale young minister Arthur Dimmesdale.

GOODWIFE 1
The winter's past, the rose in bloom.
Now sunlight has dispelled the gloom
Though forest shadows crowd our homes.

CHORUS
We framed the cabins of our faith.
We cleared the ways and muddy lanes.
This clarity we do embrace.

New England is our home, the shore
and forest ours for evermore.
Our Lord has opened up the door.

WILSON (*to the people*)

Repent. The world was born in sin.

BELLINGHAM

Repent. Let freedom here begin.

DIMMESDALE

Repent and hide thy shameful skin.

CHORUS

We do repent our sins to God
Who gave His son in earthly blood.
We mark His law in every deed.

We built this town in praise to Thee.
In freedom know we are not free.
From Thy swift justice nothing flees.

The forest shadows crowd our homes.
Redeem the day, the rose that blooms.
The winter's past and all its harms.

Hester Prynne is led from the jailhouse by the grisly town-beadle with staff in hand. They turn to the steps, their backs to the audience, though we have just made out that Hester carries a baby in her arms. Slowly they ascend the scaffold.

CHORUS

One law for the sea we crossed.
One law for the forest dark.
One law for the savage heart.
One law for the babe in arms.

Roger Chillingworth has entered the crowd in the company of an Indian in feathered regalia. He looks about with deep interest at the scene, taking in the levels of balcony, scaffold and street.

GOODWIFE 2

The Devil lives in yonder wood.
Hester Prynne is of his brood.
At night she eats his pilfered food.

GOODWIFE 3

She leveled shame upon us all
and now must wear the bitch's pall
and letter of the broken rule.

Having mounted the scaffold, Hester turns so that all can see the embroidered A fastened to her bodice over the heart. She stands bare-headed, beautiful and dignified, holding her baby.

CHORUS

One law for the sea we crossed.
One law for the forest dark.

One law for the savage heart
One law for the babe in arms.

One law for the fallen world.
One law for eternity.
One law for the woman's child.
One law, our community.

Save us from the Evil One.
Save us till all time has run
Save us! Save us!

Winter from the world is gone.
God's light on the town has shone.
Save us! Save us!

Passionate loving One,
Give us Thy blessed Son.
Save us! Save us!

CHILLINGWORTH
Who is to be saved?

SAILOR
Those born in sin.

CHILLINGWORTH
Meaning us all?

SAILOR
And her—Hester Prynne.

Chillingworth starts at the name, looks up at the woman on the scaffold.

FARMER
You must be a stranger, friend,
and do not know the scandal
In Master Dimmesdale's church.
Our fine young minister
Now must dispel the bad
Effect of this deed.

CHILLINGWORTH
Long was my journey
By land and by sea,
My bondage far off
Among the heathen.
Today an Indian
Kindly has brought me
Out of captivity.

SAILOR
You will know the tale.
Yonder woman, Sir, was the wife

of a certain learned man
and came here ahead of him
to our New England.

FARMER

She has been here two years.

SAILOR

Misguided years, they say.

CHILLINGWORTH

A bitter thing, I see.
And who, I prithee,
might the father be?

A gavel sounds three times from the balcony. The men hush and, with everyone else in the crowd, look up at the dignitaries.

WILSON

Hester. Hester Prynne,
you have acknowledged sin.
It is a vileness you have done.
We sentence you.

But in the mercy of our hearts
We spare you from the pillory
and bid you stand in shame.
We sentence you.

A short duration here
Before the public eye.
But wear the letter A
Upon your sinful breast
Until the day you die.
We sentence you.

I call upon this man,
Good Arthur Dimmesdale who
Has guided well his flock,
The folk you have betrayed,
The good man you ignored,
to save you from yourself
and sentence you.

CHILLINGWORTH (*Aside*)

I know her.

DIMMESDALE

Hester. Hester Prynne.

CHILLINGWORTH

I know her.

DIMMESDALE (*looking steadily at Hester*)

Listen to my good friend
Declaim your lowly sin.
I bid you speak the name:
your co-conspirator
who led you to this shame.
Your silent fellow-sufferer—
expose him to these eyes,
end his hypocrisy
whoever he may be.
Triumph over evil.
Open up your heart
to offerings of mercy.

CHILLINGWORTH

She will not speak.
Someone she protects.

DIMMESDALE

Hester. Hester Prynne.

CHILLINGWORTH

She will not speak.

WILSON

The name. Give us the name.

BELLINGHAM

Dear child, give us the name.

DIMMESDALE

Speak but his name. Relent.
Remove the scarlet letter
from your breast.

HESTER

Never.

DIMMESDALE

Hester. Hester Prynne. One name.

HESTER

It is too deeply branded here.
I cannot take the letter off,
and if I must I will endure
his agony as well as mine.

CHILLINGWORTH (*from the crowd*)

Speak, and give your child a father!

HESTER (*not seeing who has called*)

What father would you have her know?
I shall not speak the secret name.
A Heavenly Father she will know
and will require no other name.

DIMMESDALE

Wondrous generosity.
Wondrous strength of a woman's heart.
She will not speak.

CHORUS

She will not speak!

BELLINGHAM

One law for eternity.

CHILLINGWORTH

Woman, you must tell the name.

CHORUS

One law for the sea we crossed.
One law for the forest dark.
One law for the savage heart.
One law for the babe in arms.

Save us from the Evil One.
Save us till all time has run.
Save us! Save us!

Winter from the world has gone.
Somewhere with us there is one
as sinful as Hester Prynne.
Save him. Save him.

Hester, clutching the baby, is led down the steps and slowly into the jail.

CHILLINGWORTH

She will not speak.

DIMMESDALE

Oh generous heart.

WILSON

Young man, it is your duty now
To cleanse the sorrow from her brow.

CHORUS (*sotto voce*)

One law. One law. One law. One.

The jailhouse door slams shut.

WILSON

Our eyes are dim. We cannot see.

DIMMESDALE

One law for eternity.

CHORUS

One law. One law. One law. One.

Dimmesdale stares at the empty scaffold. Chillingworth looks up at the dignitaries above the crowd, and takes a step toward them.

BLACKOUT

[2] Scene Two

Later the same day. Hester's room in the jail. A small bed where she tends her baby. Chillingworth, carrying a doctor's satchel, is shown in by the beadle.

CHILLINGWORTH

Hester. Hester Prynne.

She recognizes him and is taken aback. The singers must convey hints of a relationship before it is openly stated.

CHILLINGWORTH

Be not afraid.
I come as a physician.
The child is ill?

HESTER

I know not how.

CHILLINGWORTH

But you know me.

HESTER

I do.
I thought you dead these two years passed.

CHILLINGWORTH

And so I died. Above a year
I've sojourned with the savages,
my lot to be an honored slave
until redeemed and then set free.

Do you remember all my studies,
both medicine and alchemy?
And now my time among the heathen
has taught me secrets of the forest.
I have a potion for the child
to give her strength to bear this cross.

HESTER

Would you deny her innocence?

CHILLINGWORTH

She is your child. She's none of mine.
I am a doctor, though, and sworn
to heal all human creatures born.

Hester allows him to administer medicine to the baby.

CHILLINGWORTH

Now one more potion have I made
for you whom I knew as a maid.

HESTER

If it were poison I might drink.

CHILLINGWORTH

Do you not know me, Hester Prynne?
Know that I would let you live
with shame that burns upon your breast.

He touches the scarlet letter, withdraws his hand. Hester lowers her head, then drains the cup of medicine he has given her.

CHILLINGWORTH

Now truly know me, Hester Prynne.
My eyes grown dim from candlelight,
an aging man, a mindful man,
too long a student of the night.

When I was young I dreamt of love,
the fond endearments of the flesh
as lovers fit like hand and glove,
but now my heart is burnt to ash.

I was misshapen all my life—
this crooked back, this lurching gait—
but hoped the scientific knife
could carve a more illustrious fate.

Perhaps some pretty girl would see
the beauty of my mind. None did.
This physical deformity—
my body—it was better hid.

I walked out of the dismal wood.
This settlement of Christian men
shall not know who I am for good.
I saw you on the scaffold then. . . .

HESTER

Then I have done you grievous wrong.

CHILLINGWORTH

We've done each other wrong. I too
must bear responsibility,
who plucked your budding youth away
and wedded you to my decay.

HESTER

Remember I was frank with you.

CHILLINGWORTH

My heart was large, my body old.
I longed to build a hearth, a fire.
I saw your smile was never cold.
You took my hand up without fear.

HESTER

I was so young. I never lied.
I shut the door on life and cried
some gallant man might rescue me.
I married you. You married me.

Always searching for a father,
though all men be made of clay,
I saw you in that English weather
and thought it was my dancing day.

The pattern and the mystery,
the sorrow of a hope gone wrong,
this is my secret history,
this is the burden of my song.

CHILLINGWORTH

Will you never say the name,
the father of your sleeping child?
You make me wonder why I came,
only to find your heart grown cold.

You kindled life in me, but now
I am a stranger to us both.
It is his name that I must know
and I will learn it, by my troth.

HESTER

Your acts are mercy but your words,
your words interpret you as terror.

CHILLINGWORTH

Hester, do not treat me hard,
for I shall know your paramour.

Betray me not unto the town.
I bear the name of Chillingworth.
They do not know me, who I am,
nothing of my English birth.

My name and motive are my own.
I could denounce you, cast you off.
Revenge is leaner than a bone,
but I shall have it. Do not scoff.

HESTER

A secret then, protecting me.

CHILLINGWORTH

As you protect your secret love.

HESTER

Too young I was
and did not know
that love would come
disguised as truth.

With my own hand
I made the letter
embroidered here
over my heart.

I would have died
but love gave me
this sleeping child
who is my life.

CHILLINGWORTH

This is my choice,
to pry the truth
in secret life
from out this town.

The letter you wear
will give you bad dreams.
Must you still wear it
even in sleep?

My heart has died
to human love.
I will possess
your lover's name.

Chillingworth reaches as if to touch the scarlet letter again.

CHILLINGWORTH

Hester. Hester Prynne.

HESTER

No!

CHILLINGWORTH

I will have his name, his life.

HESTER

Are you a devil now,
haunting the forest?
Am I bonded to you
for all of my life?
Will you have my soul?

CHILLINGWORTH

Your soul, Hester Prynne? Your soul?
No, not yours. Not yours.

*Chillingworth picks up his satchel, nods and departs.
Hester, intensely worried, cradles her child. As she sings
her lullaby to Pearl, she tucks her hair up under a narrow
cap.*

HESTER

By medicine or alchemy
sleep on, my child, sleep on.
A daughter of adultery
adored, my child, sleep on.

You are the Pearl beyond all price.
Sleep on, my love, sleep on.
More worthy than all sacrifice,

sleep on, my Pearl, sleep on.

I'll earn our bread by handiwork,
my skilled embroidery,
and you shall grow, the daughter of
a love kept secretly.

Our prison door thrown open, love,
we shall step into light,
and though I bear the letter here
over my breaking heart,

nothing will come to harm you, Pearl,
as long as I'm alive.
This lullaby I sing to you.
May you live long and thrive.

You are my Pearl beyond all price.
Sleep on, my love, sleep on.
More worthy than all sacrifice,
sleep on, my Pearl, sleep on.

BLACKOUT

[3] Choral Interlude: Time Passing

Let years accumulate like trees,
the drifting snows, the darkening wood.
As springtime blows across the sea
we strive to comprehend the good.

Time is vaster than the earth.
Time is larger than our law.
Time before all human birth
and all we have no image for.

The summers pass, the crops fulfilled,
the autumn harvests fill the barns.
Winter bows us to Thy will
and spring returns us to the farms.

We must devote our lives to God,
our safety in community,
His secrets never understood
though years revolve relentlessly.

Let days accumulate like trees,
the drifting snows, the darkening wood.
As summer blows across the sea
we strive to comprehend the good.

[4] Scene Three

*Summer, years later. The garden outside the house of
Governor Bellingham. Strolling among the blooming*

roses are the Governor himself with John Wilson. Behind them, evidently in a separate conversation, are Roger Chillingworth and Arthur Dimmesdale, the one looking older, the other paler, as if ill.

BELLINGHAM (*to Wilson*)

My dear Sir, I am pained to see the child has grown up savagely. Her mother proudly keeps apart and practices the needle's art to earn her bread. She's learned to scrimp. They say her daughter Pearl's an imp.

WILSON

This imp could be a child of night. She dresses in a cloth as bright as that incriminating letter her sinful mother has embroidered. Long years the congregation watched, observing that the child is touched with an uncanny spirit. Though we cannot fathom how, she grows as if unlawfully, and loves to dance among the apple groves and sings no tune we recognize and has much mischief in her eyes.

BELLINGHAM

So have I heard. I have been slow to act upon the rumor, though, because in our community so many troubles occupy we few who govern. As you know our founder Winthrop's dying now.

WILSON

And soon a new election day will come for those who work and pray.

BELLINGHAM

Still, I have given hours of thought to Hester Prynne, and we have got to know as a community if she has raised a child too free.

WILSON

We must interrogate the child?

BELLINGHAM

To see if she has grown too wild. The mother, meanwhile, we'll observe, discovering whether, as we've heard, she bears a look of sorcery. They shall be with us presently.

The two men turn aside on the garden path and continue their conversation. Meanwhile, Dimmesdale and Chillingworth can now be overheard.

CHILLINGWORTH

Sir, you are not well.

DIMMESDALE

My friend, you must not trouble over me. I'm one who takes too much to heart concerns of my community.

CHILLINGWORTH

Your heart is what I worry for. The way you hold your hand across your chest as if to stop a pain.

DIMMESDALE

It's nothing.

CHILLINGWORTH

Nothing? Or some great loss? David gazed upon Bathsheba, so beautiful as she was bathing, and lay with her, and sent her husband into the battle to be killed. That was the story of your sermon. Why, I wondered, dwell upon the guilty king of long ago?

DIMMESDALE

To make us all remember, friend, mankind is born enslaved to sin. Atonement is a task for all no matter where God's Grace may fall.

BELLINGHAM

Behold, the unhappy woman has come.

WILSON

And with her a scarlet little bird.

Hester and her daughter, Pearl (wearing a red dress) enter the garden and curtsy before the Governor and Mr. Wilson. Dimmesdale and Chillingworth look on with heightened interest, each keeping his motives to himself, the one torn by love and guilt, the other eager to possess and to control.

BELLINGHAM

Hester Prynne, the years have passed. The town has seen how much this lass has grown, and now it is our role to fear for her immortal soul. We charge you, speak of what you do

to teach the child the good, the true.

HESTER

The lessons that I would impart
are carried here, upon my heart.

WILSON

Woman, that is a badge of shame.

HESTER

And teaches me to lay no blame,
to judge no person but myself.

BELLINGHAM

Then we shall question this dear elf.
If you, her mother, will allow,
we'll start the examination now.

Bellingham and Wilson take Pearl aside. Hester, full of concern, looks at Chillingworth and Dimmesdale, who approach. Chillingworth, smiling odiously, has whispered something in Dimmesdale's ear.

HESTER

What do you speak of? What?
What are you planning now?
Did you convince these men
to exercise their power?

DIMMESDALE

This good man is a friend
and would do you no harm.
I lean on his advice
and trust him to be true.

Bellingham and Wilson have been shocked by something Pearl has said to them, and stagger backwards.

WILSON

How can this be!

BELLINGHAM

The little imp!

WILSON

She has a very devilish wit.

HESTER

She is my child, a gift of God.

WILSON

We have found it very odd
she cannot say how she was made.

BELLINGHAM

She knows her letters, I would say,
perhaps the Catechism's rule.

WILSON

But treats her pastor like a fool
and answers like a fox at play.
"Who made you, little child?" I said.
And she: "Nobody made me, Sir.
My mother plucked me from a rose bush
That grew outside the prison door."

HESTER

She is my child, my gift of God.

BELLINGHAM

My poor woman, we must take her.

HESTER

No! I beg you, no! No! No!

BELLINGHAM

My poor woman, we must take her.

HESTER

Never. No, no, no!

She turns imploringly to Dimmesdale.

Sir, please speak for me.
You are my pastor. Please!
Please speak for me.
You are my pastor. Please.
Please speak for me. Please!
You had charge of my soul.
You know me better than they.
You have such sympathy,
I beg you, speak for me.

WILSON

We'll find a proper home for her.

HESTER

I beg you, speak for me.

DIMMESDALE (*collecting himself*)

There is truth in what she says.
An awful sacredness,
a law that we must honor
lies between a mother
and a child, her own.
Our Father, the Creator,
had a hand in this.

CHILLINGWORTH (*ominously*)

You speak, my friend
with a strange earnestness.

DIMMESDALE

It is the will of God.
It is His Providence.
We must not be so bold
to send her daughter hence.

Silence. Pearl has come forward, drawn by Dimmesdale's words, and rests her cheek against his outstretched hand while the others look on, amazed. Dimmesdale spontaneously kisses the child's forehead. At this, Pearl laughs and skips away.

WILSON

This little baggage has bewitched you.

CHILLINGWORTH

A strange child.

DIMMESDALE

A child of God.

CHILLINGWORTH

Might we research her moods,
her personality,
and ascertain the father?

DIMMESDALE

No.

CHILLINGWORTH

But why not inquire?

HESTER

She is my child.

WILSON

She has grown wild.
She does not know
the Heavenly Father.

CHILLINGWORTH (*firmly*)

It is the earthly father
I would set out to know.

DIMMESDALE (*fearful but resigned*)

Go now, Hester Prynne.
God's will be done.

Hester departs with her daughter as the men stare after them.

BLACKOUT

[5] Scene Four

A small space of light. The home of Arthur Dimmesdale, now shared with Roger Chillingworth. Dimmesdale sits in a chair, evidently ill, a blanket over his lap. Chillingworth shakes a vial and pours its contents into a drinking glass.

CHILLINGWORTH

Just one more potion for you, friend.
I pray your suffering will end.

DIMMESDALE

My suffering means little now.
I seem embarked on a dark road
with only the solace of the Book
and memories of happiness.

CHILLINGWORTH (*half to himself*)

What weighs on you? What weakens you?
Is there some terror of the night
that keeps your tossing mind from rest?
Some quarrel with yourself? Some blade
of sorrow twisting in your breast?

DIMMESDALE

You watch me like a hawk.

CHILLINGWORTH

A doctor
Must observe his patient well.

DIMMESDALE

You question me so closely, friend.

CHILLINGWORTH

To see your suffering at an end.
I've made a study of the mind,
its weaknesses, its inward pains.
You've been my friend for years. We've shared
these lodgings and I've seen you suffer.
I've nursed you, kept you close to me,
but fear some secret grips your soul,
weakens your body day by day,
bleeds you of desire to live.

DIMMESDALE

The way you look at me—sometimes
I fear what you would hope to find.
Forgive me. You have been a friend
and your intentions have been kind.

CHILLINGWORTH (*putting on his cape and hat*)

The truth is all I wish to know.
I am a man of truth. The truth,

says John, the truth shall set you free.
There's nothing, nothing you need fear.
Rest now. Let agitation end.
Let fever fall away, and rest.
I have an errand to perform
across the town, and I will hope
to see you in a happy mood
when you have slept and I return.

(aside)

This is the fever of a guilty man
with no suspicion of a doctor's plan
to penetrate his soul and know the truth—
the evil hid as innocence and youth.

(to Dimmesdale)

Our founder, Winthrop, is on his deathbed now
and I am called to tend him at this hour.
He needs a higher physic than my own,
a doctoring of soul. Rest now, rest now.

*Chillingworth departs, carrying his medical tools.
Dimmesdale drifts into a feverish sleep.*

DIMMESDALE *(tossing in sleep)*

What is this medicine?
What did you give to me?
Why do I dream this way?
What did you say to me?
What did you, what did you say?
Ah!

He jolts awake, tosses the blanket aside.

I must. I must go. I must go out
of these confining rooms.
I must dispel this gloom.

Despair is sin
and I must live
to re-devote
myself to God.

My guilt will rend me from myself
and worse—I'm torn from Thee.
I cannot hear Thy voice!

*He walks out of the light of his room and finds himself in
the dim but broader light of the street. It is the green of
Scene One—the scaffold and balcony visible in a ghostly
way. There is a desperateness in his pacing.*

My friend. My friend must know
I am not who I seem.
I live a secret life,
a man who walks a dream.

My faith was strong. Was strong!
I know it was. Then why
am I so doubtful now,
under this peaceful sky?

The houses of the town
are sleeping secretly.
Am I an evil man?
Is this some sorcery?

*He changes direction in his wandering, wringing his
hands, his eyes darting between heaven and earth. As
he nears the scaffold, old Mistress Hibbons appears
around the corner. She has a mad aspect, evidently a
denizen of the night.*

MISTRESS HIBBONS

Ah!

DIMMESDALE

Good Mistress Hibbons,
out so late and so alone.

MISTRESS HIBBONS

Good Reverend Dimmesdale.
Good Mistress Hibbons.
Everyone is good.

DIMMESDALE

Have I offended you?

MISTRESS HIBBONS

You have offended Good.

DIMMESDALE

I do not know your meaning.

MISTRESS HIBBONS *(reading him)*

You do not know yourself.

DIMMESDALE

I pray you, let me pass.

MISTRESS HIBBONS

I see a secret in your eyes.
A secret bars you from yourself.
You hide.

DIMMESDALE

Please let me pass.

MISTRESS HIBBONS

From where to where on this good night?
These are not solving stars.
These steps do not forgive.

Now she taunts him with a witch's song:

Who do you think you are?
You hide behind the cloth.
You hide behind the book.
You cannot travel far
beyond your Master's wrath
or leering harlot's look.

The hart walks in the wood,
the antler and the branch
disguising what we see.
The quail, the breath of wind,
all stirrings of this land,
remain a mystery.

In rituals at night
a dancing witch's fire
casts shadows on the boughs.
The Devil seeks a mate
to join him in the mire,
his miserable spouse.

Out where the spirit flees,
where imps and demons crawl
over the forest floor,
no pilgrim can find peace,
a wretched caterwaul
his curse forevermore.

Come to the Devil's fire.
Dance in the flames of flesh
where you and your lover tryst.
Who do you think you are?
I see you have been kissed.
You hide your dark desire
but who says the owl
and who says I—
just who do you think you are?

Throughout her song Dimmesdale has made gestures of denial, all futile. At the end Mistress Hibbons leaves him alone on his knees in the street beneath the scaffold.

DIMMESDALE (*in agony*)
Who, who, who do I think I am?
What have I been?
How have I lived?
If God is love—but God is not love.
If God is good—but God is beyond mere human good.
Oh God, if you can hear,
those who cannot hear Thee,
save me! Save me!

Slowly he stands, singing a reverie of Hester Prynne.

Our nights, our nights—
they were more secret than the wood
and softer than the greenest fern.

Her skin, her skin—
how could it be the evil touch
the elders taught me to avoid?

Our love, our love—
she stood before me, innocent
as Eve, stepping free of her dress,

and I, a fool,
left her to take the punishment
that should have been ours to share.

The child, the child.
I loved her and I left her there
as if my love of God were all.

I was afraid.
I worshipped the community.
I worshipped what they thought of me.

Depravity!
Worship of images, of days
that are ephemeral as flies!

Yet she was young
and came to me in loneliness
and I, a man, did not resist.

Oh God, oh God,
the heavens seem indifferent
to all our suffering here on Earth.

I am a man,
a single life beneath these stars,
a beggar on an empty road.

As he begins to regain his dignity.

Where am I now? Ah yes, the square,
the scaffold where she stood erect
and beautiful to every stare,
beyond my power to protect.

I was a coward, then as now.
Why do I fear confession so
when even scripture will allow
all men must reap the sin they sow.

He feels great pain in his chest, places his hand over his heart. A bell tolls in the distance. Dimmesdale acts as if it tolls for him alone. After a moment, Roger

Chillingworth appears, on his way home from Governor Winthrop's house.

CHILLINGWORTH

My friend, you do not sleep.
I've come from Winthrop's deathbed—
a face more peaceful, far, than yours.

DIMMESDALE (*ill*)

I cannot sleep. I cannot sleep.

CHILLINGWORTH

The potion that I gave to you?

DIMMESDALE

I cannot sleep. I have such pains.

CHILLINGWORTH

The night air cannot do you good.
Come home with me and rest. Your heart
must need unburdening.

DIMMESDALE

But I have sinned, and I must work.
There must be some work I can do.
Beyond the town are Indians
who need a Christian minister.
Tomorrow I will go to them.

CHILLINGWORTH (*again ominously*)

But first, my friend, I'll minister
to you. Come home and rest. Come home.

Dimmesdale, drained and weakened, is led offstage by the older and stronger man.

BLACKOUT

CD 2

Act Two

[1] Scene One

Daylight. The dappled light of the forest on the edge of town. Hester and Pearl, the latter in her red dress, are walking away from town, into the woods. Chillingworth intercepts them.

CHILLINGWORTH

Why do you walk so quickly, Hester Prynne?
Will you consent to speak?

Slowly Hester acknowledges that she cannot avoid this meeting. She sends Pearl off to play. During the next

few minutes we see the girl playing apart from the central action of the scene.

CHILLINGWORTH

You look at me with hatred in your eyes.

HESTER

Pity for a man so changed.
You are become a monster,
deformed by your desire
to ruin someone else.
The wisdom I once saw in you
has withered like a rotting vine.

CHILLINGWORTH

I know his name.

HESTER

What of the name?
These many years
you've lived in an abyss
of names

CHILLINGWORTH

For justice.

HESTER

Justice!

CHILLINGWORTH

I shall reveal the man
who put this letter on your heart.

HESTER

I put the letter here myself.

CHILLINGWORTH

Not so. The man you would protect
pretends to innocence.
One word. One word from me
and he would fall
from his almighty pulpit
into the wretched prison cell,
then rise up to the gallows.

HESTER (*steeling herself*)

Have you not tortured him enough?
I'll warn him,
tell him who you truly are.

CHILLINGWORTH

And break your promise to me?

HESTER

You may call it justice.

CHILLINGWORTH (*controlling his rage*)
Nothing will help you now.
Nothing is left for me but hate.

HESTER
You cannot change the past.

CHILLINGWORTH (*with a gesture after Pearl*)
Nor you.
Hester, now be warned,
as you have scorned my love,
your paramour will fall.

Chillingworth departs, enraged, toward the town. For a moment Hester is alone.

HESTER
How was it I once loved
a man so full of hate?
Sometimes I fear I'll burn
to death of it.
But I feel only sorrow.

This canopy of trees,
these spots of sunlight on the earth,
the light and shadow of our life—
sorrow, only sorrow.

I've heard our minister
went out before the dawn
and may return along this path.
Oh may it be the end
of sorrow.

Pearl approaches, having fashioned a letter A out of grass. She shows it to her mother.

My love, what have you made?
A toy of justice.
And do you know, my love,
why your mother wears
this letter on her breast?

Pearl nods, then skips about, playing. Hester walks with her, and they cross a stream about mid-stage, at an angle to the audience.

The man you saw me speaking to
believes he knows the answer.
Our minister is seen to touch
the same place on his heart.

Just so.
The judgment of the world
descends.

But now, my love,
now is a time to play.
Run and catch the sun
before the coming fall.

Pearl sees something that delights her and chases it offstage, leaping back across the stream as she goes.

This canopy of trees
once sheltered us in love.
Why must we suffer here?
What must we prove?

Dimmesdale enters, returning toward the town. He holds a hand over his heart, pausing as if to catch his breath. He and Hester notice each other at the same time.

DIMMESDALE
Hester. Hester Prynne.

HESTER
Reverend Dimmesdale.

DIMMESDALE
I dreamed I would find you here.

HESTER
And I you.

DIMMESDALE
I've come from work among the heathen.

HESTER
Ah. And did they minister to you?

DIMMESDALE
No one can help me now.

HESTER
I would. Dear friend, I would.

They have moved slowly closer to each other, warily, keeping on the same side of the brook, each almost disbelieving the other's bodily existence.

DIMMESDALE
Hester. Have you found peace?

HESTER
Have you?

DIMMESDALE
None.

HESTER

Surely your ministry?
Surely the love of the town,
the work you do for good?

DIMMESDALE

A lie. You alone know who I am,
and all these years you would not speak my name,
you who bear so openly our sin.

HESTER

I too have kept an awful secret.
That man, that hateful man,
the doctor, Roger Chillingworth—
long years ago in England he
was not the man he is today.
He bore another name.
He was my husband.

Dimmesdale, stunned, slowly takes it in.

I was so young.
I did not understand.

DIMMESDALE

I should have known
by the way he speaks to me!

HESTER

And when I feared him lost at sea,
you were my minister
and you did comfort me. . .

DIMMESDALE

These years old Chillingworth has been my friend.

HESTER

No friend. No friend.
His motive is revenge.

DIMMESDALE

As much as I deserve.
I am a ruined man.
Resolve me, Hester.
Think for me.
Tell me what to do.

He has fallen to his knees before her, bowing his head in utter shame.

HESTER

And is the world so narrow?
The borders of the town—
are they the world?
The mind—is it a wall
between us and our life?

DIMMESDALE

Hester, what is your meaning?

HESTER

Look at the forest canopy,
the stream beside us here.
What are the boundaries of the world?
Where is the law of men?

DIMMESDALE

There is a law. There is one law.

HESTER

But where? Show me
where is the world of that one law?
These trees? These portions of the sky?
Dear friend, we are outside the town,
outside the laws of men.

Into the wilderness
the spirit goes.
No one can stop it being free.
Long have I thought of this,
but seeing you now, I see.

Dimmesdale rises, filled with encouragement by Hester's words.

The judgment of the world,
the walls of yonder town,
the rage of Chillingworth—
cast off this pall and live.
Arthur, you can change
your name, your town, your life.
You can be someone new.

DIMMESDALE

And Hester, so might you?

HESTER

Why do we live this life
as the elders tell us to live?
Where is our freedom now
under these ancient trees?
How far does the forest go?
Where do the mountains end?

DUET:

The past is gone.
We shall know joy again.
As we loved once, under this canopy,
we shall know love again.
Our bed the earth,
our blanket sky

our Eden here.
The past is gone.

Hester removes her hat and shakes free her hair. She unclasps the letter at her heart. As she removes it and casts it aside, Dimmesdale touches her heart.

Our Eden here is love.
Throw off the stain of sin.
This is our freedom now,
under these ancient trees,
clear as the flowing stream
crossing the forest floor.
There are no borders here,
no secrets left to hold,

nothing to lie about.
Our Eden here is love.
Our Eden here is love.

They embrace and kiss. Then Dimmesdale notices Pearl approaching from behind Hester, on the other side of the stream. The girl has decked herself with wildflowers gathered in the woods. She pauses on the opposite bank of the stream.

DIMMESDALE
The child.

HESTER
My love?

DIMMESDALE
Our child.

HESTER (*leaving the embrace*)
Our Pearl beyond all price.

DIMMESDALE
Does she know her father?

HESTER
She will. And she will love you as I do.

Dimmesdale steps toward the stream. He and Pearl face each other across the boundary of water.

DIMMESDALE
She is so beautiful,
an elvish spirit of the forest.

To Pearl:

Child, I hold my hand to you.
Why do you not cross the stream?
Nothing should be a boundary

between us now.
Come to your father. Come.

Pearl shakes her head. She has noticed the letter missing from her mother's breast and points at the vacancy.

HESTER
The letter.

DIMMESDALE
'Tis nothing, girl.
Come to your father. Come.

HESTER
Where did I drop the letter?

DIMMESDALE
Why does it matter now?
Our only law is love.

HESTER
I must find the letter.
No one must know we have renewed our love.
Only beyond the town can we be free.

Hester finds the letter and fastens it again to her breast. She turns to Pearl and sings reproachfully.

Now do you know your mother, child?
Now do you know me?

Pearl leaps across the brook, dashes past Dimmesdale and into her mother's arms. The minister, chastened by this turn of events, looks on.

DIMMESDALE
She has her mother now.

HESTER
Also her father.

DIMMESDALE
So I would hope to be. But how?

Hester lets Pearl run off again. Pearl stays by the stream, casting her gathered flowers on the water.

HESTER (*firming a plan*)
There is a ship in Boston harbor
bound for far away,
and we could book our passage, love,
after Election Day.

DIMMESDALE
I've met the Captain on the street,

given a sailor's prayer.
He's bound for far away, my love.
We'll find our freedom there.

DUET:

The pattern and the mystery
brought us together here.
We shall abandon history,
live where the weather's fair.

Under the forest canopy
we shall discover now
out in the world we can be free.
This is our perfect vow.

HESTER
The past is gone.

DIMMESDALE
The future's ours.

HESTER
There is a ship.

DIMMESDALE
Election Day.

HESTER
Prepare, my love.

DIMMESDALE
Prepare and pray.

HESTER
I'll pray for us.

DIMMESDALE
I'll pray for us.

HESTER
Farewell.

DIMMESDALE
Farewell.

They kiss. Pearl runs to her mother, and they exit toward the town, hand in hand.

Farewell.

Dimmesdale watches them go, then suddenly feels a pain in his chest and places his hand there. He nods, as if recognizing an old truth.

My happiness departs.
The stream runs clear, but I

am darkening like the sky
above these trees.

Who do I think I am?
Have I forsaken God?
How can I face the town?
Who, says the owl. Who?

He paces, increasingly anxious, looking offstage where Hester has gone.

Hester, I am not strong like you.
Hester, I'll not live long like you.
Shall I create a life with you?
Free of the prying eyes with you?
Sail with you far away, my love,
under the perfect sky above?

He raises his eyes to the canopy of trees.

Hester. Hester Prynne.
Can we be free of sin?

BLACKOUT

[2] Scene Two

In the darkness between the final two scenes we can hear the chorus chanting:

One law for the fallen world.
One law for eternity.
One law for the woman's child.
One law, our community.

Save us from the Evil One.
Give us Thy blessed Son.
Save us, save us!

One law, our community.
One law, our community.

One law. One law. One law. One.

Lights rise on the street as we saw it at the beginning of the opera: meeting house, scaffold, jail, all decorated for Election Day. The crowd is gathering: farmers, fishermen, sailors, goodwives, a few Indians.

Strike up the march. Let music play.
Election Day! Election Day!

FARMER
Today the people have a say.

CHORUS

Election Day! Election Day!

SAILOR

From houses crowding to the bay,

GOODWIFE 1

From forests dark as ebony,

GOODWIFE 2

The people come to work and pray.

GOODWIFE 3

We worship in community.

CHORUS

Election Day! Election Day!

At one fringe of the crowd we have noticed old Chillingworth conferring with a Shipmaster, their conversation apparently full of dark plotting. At another end Hester and Pearl have arrived. Hester's plain dress is adorned with the scarlet letter. Pearl wears her brighter, bolder attire. Hester is watching the crowd, evidently looking for Dimmesdale. Instead, the Shipmaster, released from Chillingworth, accosts her.

SHIPMASTER

A word, a word!

HESTER

You have a berth for us?

SHIPMASTER

Madam, I do. For you, your child, and the gentleman you mentioned.

HESTER

We're bound away from here.

SHIPMASTER

That is the wish of others, too. The old man, Chillingworth, has asked if he might sail with us, and I have offered him a berth near yours.

Before Hester can react, Mistress Hibbons emerges from the crowd. Now Hester's attention is distracted from two sides at once.

HESTER

This cannot be!

MISTRESS HIBBONS

Who do you look for? Who?
Is it the minister

who met you in the wood?

SHIPMASTER

We'll take the tide and sail before the week is out.

MISTRESS HIBBONS

A woman knows the world, the secrets of the wood, and you cannot escape. I know you are not good.

HESTER

Madame, you mistake me.

SHIPMASTER

We'll take the tide and sail.

MISTRESS HIBBONS

I see you've brought your girl.

To Pearl:

Thou art the lineage of the Prince of the Air! Wilt thou fly with me some night to meet the minister?

Pearl looks desperately at her mother, who fends off the old woman. Just at that moment a drum roll sounds the start of the parade. Mistress Hibbons, startled, melts into the crowd, later to leave the stage altogether. From behind the meeting house a procession emerges to music that sounds both martial and religious. Flags and banners wave. At the head of the procession are Dimmesdale, looking pale and profoundly distracted, Wilson and Bellingham.

SHIPMASTER (*departing*)

We sail within the week.

Chillingworth has fallen in behind the leaders with a kind of eager piety masking his dark intent. Most of the crowd joins the parade as it progresses. A few, like Hester and Pearl, remain as bystanders. The march circles the stage, passing the scaffold, crossing to the meeting house steps, which the three dignitaries mount as the chorus sings.

CHORUS

Strike up the march. Let the music play. Today the people have their say. Bless, O Lord, Election Day, and all of us who work and pray. Election Day! Election Day!

God names His own elect to stay.
We have a voice, who work and pray.
It is our Lord who offers grace
and not the humble human race.
We have a voice, who work and pray.
Election Day! Election Day!

BELLINGHAM (*calling for order*)
Hear ye, hear ye, one and all,
to mark our celebration now
acknowledging our God, we bow
our heads before this meeting hall.

WILSON (*praying*)
Come Holy Ghost, Creator blest,
vouchsafe within our hearts to rest;
come with Thy grace and heavenly aid,
and fill the hearts which Thou hast made.

ALL
Amen.

BELLINGHAM (*indicating Dimmesdale*)
Our hearts are filled, and now we pause
to listen to our shepherd here
who knows his flock and knows the laws
that bind us in this earthly sphere.

Dimmesdale has been standing with head bowed, a hand over his heart. He now lifts his head slowly, looks over the crowd below, unable to see Hester and Pearl. When he begins his sermon it is slowly, hesitantly, then gaining in strength, making his last vital gestures.

DIMMESDALE
Dear friends. Dear brethren gathered here
on this our proud Election Day
our settlement has cause to cheer,
and I have only this to say:

The forest far beyond our farms
now echoes with our industry.
Risking a plenitude of harms,
our fishermen patrol the sea,

but what are we? Yea, who are we
who toil and pray and clear the land?
We are the Lord's community,
His grace delivered at His hand.

Free in our choices, honor bound
to turn the Devil off the path,
we consecrate our bit of ground
and bow our heads before the Truth.

Community! Community

has always helped us to endure.
In freedom know we are not free
unless our pilgrim hearts be pure.

In the last verse his mind begins to reel at what he is saying.

CHORUS
Community! Community
has always helped us to endure.
In freedom know we are not free
unless our pilgrim hearts be pure.

DIMMESDALE
This still small voice, the wilderness
around us darkened by our terror—
come Holy Ghost, Creator blest
and guide us out of sin and error.

CHORUS
In freedom know we are not free
unless our pilgrim hearts be pure.

As the chorus continues, the dignitaries descend from the meeting house balcony to the street, rejoining the procession.

It is our God who offers grace
and not the humble human race.
We have a choice. We work and pray.
Election Day. Election Day.

One law for the forest dark.
One law for the sea we crossed.
One law for the savage heart.
One law for the saved, the lost.

As he descends the steps, Dimmesdale has been looking into the crowd. His physical weakness is now so apparent that Wilson offers him support. Suddenly before the scaffold steps the crowd parts, revealing Hester, who holds Pearl by the hand. Dimmesdale pauses, seeing this, then reaches out toward them.

DIMMESDALE
Hester. Hester!

The crowd has silenced, focusing only on this small family facing each other in public before the scaffold steps.

Come hither, Pearl.
You are my Pearl beyond all price.

Roger Chillingworth, who has stood by in the crowd, pushes forward, taking Dimmesdale by the arm and forcing him away.

CHILLINGWORTH
Wave back that woman!
Cast off this child
and do not blacken
your name with dishonor.

DIMMESDALE
Tempter. Tempter!
Thou art the Devil,
but with God's help
I shall escape you.

Turning to Hester and Pearl.

Hester. Hester Prynne.
Give me your strength.
Let it be guided by God.
Let us join hands
and banish the lie.
Come, Hester, come!
Give me your arm.

CHILLINGWORTH
Wave back that woman.
She is the Devil's mate.
Witness the letter
she bears on her breast!

DIMMESDALE (*to Hester*)
Give me your arm.

*Hester helps Dimmesdale as he mounts the scaffold.
Pearl joins them, taking her father's other arm.*

CHILLINGWORTH
What is this foolishness?
You think it bravery?
Now you would spit in the face
of your truest friend?
What is my wrath to you now?
No spot on this earth
would be safe from my spite
except for this scaffold.

*Atop the scaffold, Dimmesdale looks Hester in the eye.
They have in this brief moment, despite the awestruck
crowd below them, a space of intimacy.*

DIMMESDALE (*weakly*)
Is this not better, Hester Prynne,
than our dreams in the forest?

HESTER
I know not, Arthur. I know not.

DIMMESDALE
For you and Pearl, the truth at last,
and pray that God is merciful.
Hester, I am a dying man.
I should make haste to meet the truth.

Dimmesdale turns to face the crowd.

Ye people of New England, hear!
At last I stand upon the spot
I should have taken years ago.
I should have stood beside this woman.
She is no Pharisee. She makes
no false display of piety,
but bears the letter of our sin,
our common sin, without complaint.

You judged her and I let you judge,
and I stood by among you there,
as much a sinner, a secret man,
equal in infamy, afraid
of what community would say.

He steps forward.

God saw the letter on her heart
and saw. . . He saw the sin in me.
The Devil plied his wicked power,
leaving me afraid. No more!
Behold. Behold!

*Dimmesdale tears open his robe and tunic, revealing a
scarlet letter A as if branded upon his chest. No sooner
has he displayed the mark to the astonished crowd than
he collapses on the scaffold. Hester and Pearl come to
his aid.*

CHILLINGWORTH
You have escaped me.
You have escaped me!

DIMMESDALE
May God forgive you,
and may you learn the ways
you too have sinned.

CHILLINGWORTH
You have escaped me.

*Dimmesdale's eyes are now fixed on his family. Hester
holds his head on her lap.*

DIMMESDALE (*weakening*)

My Pearl, you see
your father before you.
This is no forest dream,
but will you kiss me now?

Pearl kisses her father and begins to weep.

Hester. Hester Prynne.

HESTER

My love, shall we not have
immortal life?
Have we not suffered enough?

DIMMESDALE

I bear the mark.
It is God's will.
We have the truth.
Praised be His name.
And now, perhaps, the peace
that passeth understanding...

Dimmesdale dies. Hester wails and bows her head over his body. In the crowd below everyone bows heads except Chillingworth, who stands apart in his impotent rage. For the remainder of the opera we seem to move into abstracted space—a dream time in which the whole of history can be glimpsed.

CHORUS

Let days accumulate like trees,
the driven rain, the darkening wood.
As summer blows across the sea
we strive to comprehend the good.

Time is vaster than the earth.
Time is larger than our law.
Time before all human birth
and all we have no image for.

Now as the light grows dim we hear
the heartbeat of another year.
All honor to the story told.
We understand as we grow old
only the mystery we hold.

Only the mystery.

BLACKOUT