How does Hawthorne feel about the community of Salem? Give an example to support your claim.

Why does Hawthorne compare himself to his ancestors and take their shame on himself? What attitude does he have towards their religion?

Why does Hawthorne tell readers The Scarlet Letter is based on a real piece of cloth and a historical manuscript he found while working at the Custom House? What does he do with the letter and what does this reveal about his character and the significance of the letter itself?

How is the work of a "romance-writer" different from the work of other writers? Why did Hawthorne find it so difficult to write a romance?
What could the wild rosebush symbolize? What could be suggested by the fact that the rosebush might have survived as part of the “stern old wilderness”? Why do we need to know this?

Anne Hutchinson was a Puritan woman with religious ideas at odds with the accepted Puritan doctrines of the day. When Hawthorne states that that rosebush “sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Anne Hutchinson,” why is it important that he describes her as “sainted”?

What is the significance of the two structures the narrator claims each new colony must build? What could each symbolize about the society?

Why is the prison and the prison door described in such detail? How does this set the tone for the rest of the novel?
The other Puritan women in the marketplace argue whether death would have been a more appropriate punishment for Hester’s crime. What do you think? Was standing on the scaffold and wearing the letter an appropriate punishment?

When Hester is standing on the scaffold, she is likened to the Virgin Mary. What comparisons are there between the two women?

While standing on the scaffold, Hester sees scenes from her past rather than her actual surroundings. What do we learn about Hester from this? Why do you think she mentally escapes to her past?

Consider how Hester decorates the scarlet letter. What does the elaborate decoration suggest about her character? What could her choice of thread symbolize?
Why do you think Hester refuses to reveal the name of her child’s father? Do you agree with her decision? Explain.

How does the description of Reverend Dimmsdale compare with the description of the other clergymen? Why could this be significant?

What dramatic purpose could the arrival of the stranger in the marketplace serve?

What does the stranger mean when he says Hester will be a “living sermon against sin”? Why do you think the stranger insists the father of the child “will be known”? 
Why does Chillingworth want Hester to live with the scarlet letter as her punishment for adultery rather than escape it through death? What does this suggest about his character?

Why do you think Hester agrees to keep Chillingworth’s true identity a secret? Do you agree with her decision? Explain.

Hester’s adultery is as much Chillingworth’s fault as it is Hester’s. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Explain.

Consider Roger Chillingworth’s name. What could Hawthorne be suggesting about Chillingworth’s character through his name?
Why do you think Hester chooses to stay in Boston and bear her punishment? Do you agree with her decision? Explain.

Hester, with the approval of the magistrates, chooses to live in a small thatched cottage on the outskirts of town. What does this symbolize? How does this add to Hester’s character development?

Despite her crime, Hester’s sewing becomes a sought after fashion in the community. Why do you think this is?

What special knowledge does Hester think the scarlet letter gives her? What kind of powder do the townspeople give to the letter? Why do you think this is?
What is the significance of the name Hester gives her child? Why do you think she named her thus?

Do you think Pearl is a blessing or a curse for Hester? Explain.

Why does Pearl avoid other Puritan children and get angry if they approach her? How is her method of play different from the other children’s? What could Hawthorne be suggesting about Puritan society through this?

How is Pearl dressed? What does this suggest about her character?
Chapter 7: The Governor's Hall

Should Pearl be taken away from Hester? Explain your reasoning.

Pearl cries when Hester won’t give her a red rose. Why is this? What could this symbolize?

Hester sees a distorted reflection in the breastplate of the armor at the governor's mansion, which makes the scarlet letter the most prominent feature of her appearance. What could this symbolize?

How is Governor Bellingham’s garden described? What could this symbolize?
Why doesn’t Pearl give the right answer to the catechism (religious) question the governor asks her, even though she knows the answer?

Why do you think Hester tells Mistress Hibbins that if Pearl was taken away from her she would have gone into the forest and signed the Black Man’s book? What purpose does Mistress Hibbins’ invitation serve?

Why do you think Chillingworth looks uglier and more misshapen to Hester now?

Why do you think Pearl is less “wild and flighty” in the presence of Dimmsdale? What could this suggest?
What is the significance of Prynne’s choosing Chillingworth as his new name? Consider the connotations of the new name.

The pictures on Dimmsdale’s tapestries allude to the Biblical tale of Bathsheba and David, a tale of adultery. Although David is aware that Bathsheba is married, he sleeps with and conceives a child with her. Why is this allusion significant at this point in the story?

Why is Chillingworth called a “leech”? Why is this significant? Consider the connotations of the word, as well as its medical purpose.

How has Reverend Dimmsdale’s health declined? What could this symbolize? Why is it significant that he puts his hand over his heart whenever he is in pain?
Why does Pearl place burrs (a rough or prickly covering or shell of a seed or fruit) on Hester’s scarlet letter? Why doesn’t Hester remove them? What could this suggest?

Why does the narrator not reveal what Chillingworth discovers on Dimmsdale’s chest?

Do you think Dimmesdale realizes that Chillingworth’s presence contributes to his sickness? If so, why does he allow Chillingworth to continue to counsel him?

How is Pearl portrayed as lawless in this chapter? What commentary about Puritan society could Hawthorne be making through her actions?
Chapter 11: The Interior of a Heart

How does Chillingworth make Dimmesdale suffer? Could he actually stop torturing Dimmesdale? How much control does Chillingworth have over his actions?

The Scarlet Letter
Nathaniel Hawthorne

Why doesn’t Dimmesdale confess? Do you agree with his decision? Explain.

The Scarlet Letter
Nathaniel Hawthorne

Why does Dimmesdale laugh when he whips himself? What is the significance of both the action and the reaction?

The Scarlet Letter
Nathaniel Hawthorne

The beginning of the chapter alludes to a victim “forever on the rack,” an ancient torture device. The victim is strapped to it, and then pressure is applied stretching the victim’s body apart. Who is the victim here? Who is the torturer?

The Scarlet Letter
Nathaniel Hawthorne
Why does Dimmesdale want to stand on the scaffold with Hester and Pearl at night? Why is it significant that it is a very dark night?

What is the significance of the red A that Dimmesdale sees in the sky? Why are we told that others interpret it to mean “angel”? What does this suggest?

How does the scaffold scene in this chapter differ from the scaffold in the first chapter?

How do you feel about Dimmesdale at this point in the novel? Explain your reasoning.
Why do you think Hester spends so much time caring for the poor and the sick? How does her work affect the meaning of the A on her chest?

How does this chapter define being a woman? What does it mean that Hester is no longer a “woman”?

How has Hester’s appearance changed? What does this suggest about her character?

At the end of the chapter, it is stated that the scarlet letter “had not done its office.” What does this mean? Whose view is this? What did the scarlet letter actually do?
Why does Chillingworth pity Hester but Dimmesdale?

Do you feel any sympathy for Chillingworth? Explain.

Why does Chillingworth’s desire to find his wife’s love make it a “devil’s office”?

What is the “black flower” that appears at the end of the chapter? What does it symbolize?
Hester says that Chillingworth “has done me worse wrong that I did him.” Do you agree with her? Explain.

Why doesn’t Hester tell Pearl what the scarlet letter means? Do you agree with her decision? Explain. Why is Hester “false to the symbol on her bosom” for the first time in seven years?

Pearl makes a connection between the scarlet letter on her mother’s chest and Dimmesdale placing his hand over his heart. What do you think caused Pearl to make this connection?

Why does Pearl make her own scarlet letter out of eel-grass (grass with long ribbon-like leaves often found in flowing water)?
Why does Hawthorne set the meeting between Hester and Dimmesdale in the forest? What is the significance of the forest?

How does Pearl both compare and contrast with the brook in the forest?

What purpose does the sunlight have in this chapter? What does it symbolize?

How does Hester acknowledge her sin in her Pearl?
Why do Hester and Dimmesdale ask if the other is still alive when they first see each other?

How much responsibility does Hester bear for Dimmesdale’s suffering? Explain.

Why does Hester suggest leaving Boston? Why does Dimmesdale agree to the plan?

Should Dimmesdale have forgiven Hester for not telling him about Chillingworth’s true identity? Explain.
How does the atmosphere in the forest change once Hester removes the letter and lets her hair down? What could this suggest?

What is the significance of the wolf offering Pearl its head to be patted?

Why is it so easy for Hester to remove the scarlet letter?

At this point, do you have more sympathy for Hester’s position or for Dimmesdale’s? Explain.
Chapter 19: The child at the Brook-Side

Why does Pearl refuse to come to Hester until she puts the scarlet letter back on? What does this suggest?

The Scarlet Letter
Nathaniel Hawthorne

Why does Pearl refuse to embrace Dimmesdale? Are her actions understandable or cruel? Explain.

How does sunshine serve as a symbol in this chapter? How does it differ from its significance in the last chapter?

Why is it significant that Pearl will not bring Hester the scarlet letter and makes her pick it up for herself?
Why do Hester and Dimmesdale decide to return to England? Why is this significant? How likely is it that their plan will succeed? Explain.

Why is the chapter called “The Minister in a Maze?”

Why is Dimmesdale tempted “to do some strange, wild, wicked thing” to every member of the community he encounters? Why is he so tempted to contaminate others with his words?

Why does Dimmesdale suddenly have so much more physical energy upon his return from the forest? Why is this significant?
How is Dimmesdale’s joy at still being able to preach the Election Day sermon ironic?

What are several ways in which Hester is described as an outsider in this chapter? Why is this significant?

Why does Chillingworth let Hester learn from the ship’s captain that he plans to sail with Hester and Dimmesdale to England? Explain the significance and why this troubles Hester.

Why does Hester dress as he has for the last seven years on Election Day? What does this suggest about her character?
Why does Hester tell Pearl that “we must not always talk in the marketplace of what happens to us in the forest”? Explain the significance of both settings.

The Indians in the marketplace do not know the significance of the scarlet letter, assuming that “the wearer of this brilliantly embroidered badge must needs be a personage of high dignity among her people.” What does this suggest about the scarlet letter and its method of punishment?

Why are none of Dimmesdale’s sermon’s words given, even though we are told so much about its tone?

Why does Hawthorne have the “self-same” women appear in this scene as appeared at the novel’s beginning? Why is it that the compassionate woman with the child is the one who died?
Why does Hester plead for assurance that she and Dimmesdale will meet again after death? How does Dimmesdale respond? Why? Why is this significant?

What makes Dimmesdale decide to confess?

How did the mark appeared on Dimmesdale’s chest? Explain your opinion with evidence from the text.

Why is the place of Dimmesdale’s death—the scaffold on which Hester was punished at the beginning of the novel—significant?
Why does Chillingworth leave all his property to Pearl? What becomes of her at the novel's end?

Why are Hester and Dimmesdale buried side-by-side, but with a space in between?

Why did Hester decide to return to Boston and wear the scarlet letter again? Do you agree with her decision? Explain. Why is the color of her robe significant?

At the novel's end, how has the symbolism of the scarlet letter changed?