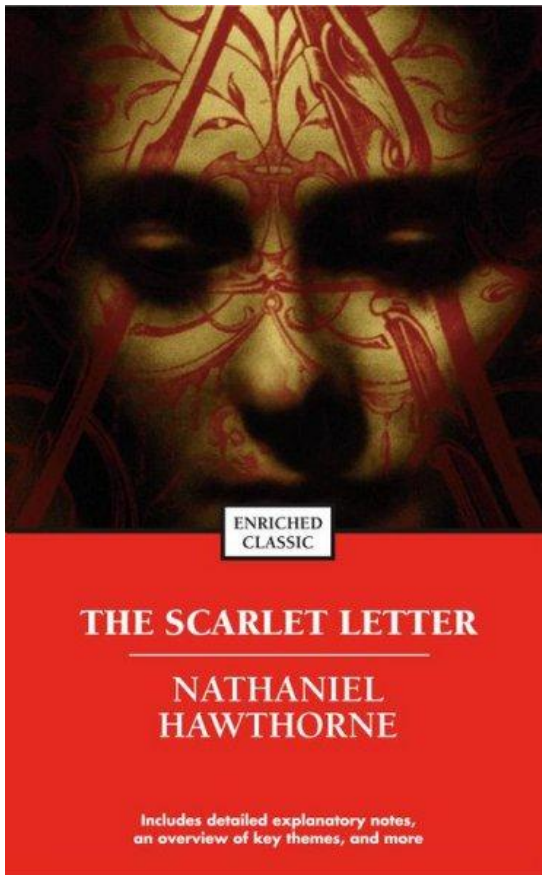
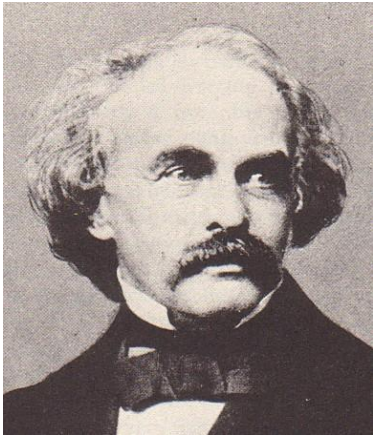


## About the book...



A stark and allegorical tale of adultery, guilt, and social repression in Puritan New England, *The Scarlet Letter* is a foundational work of American literature. Nathaniel Hawthorne's exploration of the dichotomy between the public and private self, internal passion and external convention, gives us the unforgettable Hester Prynne, who discovers strength in the face of ostracism and emerges as a heroine ahead of her time. As Kathryn Harrison points out in her Introduction, Hester is "the herald of the modern American heroine, a mother of such strength and stature that she towers over her progeny much as she does the citizens of Salem."

## About the author... (<http://www.randomhouse.com>)



Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) was born in Salem, Massachusetts, and made his ambition to be a writer while still a teenager. He graduated from Bowdoin College in Maine, where the poet Longfellow was also a student, and spent several years travelling in New England and writing short stories before his best-known novel *The Scarlet Letter* was published in 1850. His writing was not at first financially rewarding and he worked as measurer and surveyor in the Boston and Salem Custom Houses. In 1853 he was sent to Liverpool as American consul and then lived in Italy before returning to the US in 1860, where he died in his sleep four years later.

## Literary Criticism

This review of *The Scarlet Letter* praises the novel as Hawthorne's best production and declares it "a genuine native romance" full of subtle terror. As Hawthorne predicted, the reviewer considers the introduction, "The Custom-House," particularly appealing.]

The weird and ghostly legends of the Puritanic history present a singularly congenial field for the exercise of Mr. Hawthorne's peculiar genius. From this fruitful source he has derived the materials for his most remarkable creations. He never appears so much in his element as when threading out some dim, shadowy tradition of the twilight age of New England, peering into the faded records of our dark-visaged forefathers for the lingering traces of the preternatural, and weaving into his gorgeous web of enchantment the slender filaments which he has drawn from the distaff of some muttering witch on Gallows-Hill. He derives the same terrible excitement from these legendary horrors, as was drawn by Edgar Poe from the depths of his own

dark and perilous imagination, and brings before us pictures of death-like, but strangely fascinating agony, which are described with the same minuteness of finish—the same slow and fatal accumulation of details—the same exquisite coolness of coloring, while everything creeps forward with irresistible certainty to a soul-harrowing climax—which made the last-named writer such a consummate master of the horrible and infernal in fictitious composition. Hawthorne's tragedies, however, are always motivated with a wonderful insight and skill, to which the intellect of Poe was a stranger. In the most terrific scenes with which he delights to scare the imagination, Hawthorne does not wander into the region of the improbable; you scarcely know that you are in the presence of the supernatural, until your breathing becomes too thick for this world, it is the supernatural relieved, softened, made tolerable, and almost attractive, by a strong admixture of the human; you are tempted onward by the mild, unearthly light, which seems to shine upon you like a healthful star; you are blinded by no lurid glare; you acquiesce in the necessity of the wizard journey; instead of being provoked to anger by a superfluous introduction to the company of the devil and his angels.

The elements of terror, which Mr. Hawthorne employs with such masterly effect, both in the original conception of his characters and the scenes of mystery and dread in which they are made to act, are blended with such sweet gushes of natural feeling, such solemn and tender relations of the deepest secrets of the heart,

that the painful impression is greatly mitigated, and the final influence of his most startling creation is a serene sense of refreshment, without the stupor and bewilderment occasioned by a drugged cup of intoxication.

The "Scarlet Letter," in our opinion, is the greatest production of the author, beautifully displaying the traits we have briefly hinted at, and sustained with a more vigorous reach of imagination, a more subtle instinct of humanity, and a more imposing splendor of portraiture, than any of his most successful previous works. (p. 203)

[The "Scarlet Letter" is] a genuine native romance, which none will be content without reading for themselves. The moral of the story—for it has a moral for all wise enough to detect it—is shadowed forth rather than expressed in a few brief sentences near the close of the volume....

The introduction, presenting a record of savory reminiscences of the Salem Custom House, a frank display of autobiographical confessions, and a piquant daguerreotype of his ancient colleagues in office, while surveyor of that port, is written with Mr. Hawthorne's unrivalled force of graphic delineation, and will furnish an agreeable amusement to those who are so far from the scene of action as to feel no wound in their personal relations, by the occasional too sharp touches of the caustic acid, of which the "gentle author" keeps some

phials on his shelf for convenience and use. The querulous tone in which he alludes to his removal from the Custom House, may be forgiven to the sensitiveness of a poet, especially as this is so rare a quality in Uncle Sam's office holders. (p. 207)

*Source Citation: "Review of 'The Scarlet Letter.'" Littell's Living Age. 25.311 (May 1850): 203-207. Rpt. in Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism. Ed. Laurie Lanzen Harris. Vol. 10. Detroit: Gale Research, 1985. 203-207. Literature Resource Center. Gale*

## **The Scarlet Letter: Overview**

There are reasons to call *The Scarlet Letter* the first modern novel. Certainly it has ancestors in the classic English gothic novel, in the popular sentimental novel, and in the divergent realism of Defoe and Fielding. Even more, it is a descendant of the historical romance of Walter Scott. But the heritage of these British models is transformed in the American offspring of Nathaniel Hawthorne. *The Scarlet Letter* is a modern novel in 1) its unity of plot, characterization, space, time, tone, and imagery; 2) its conscious use of symbolism; and 3) its serious moral-psychological theme.

The unity of *The Scarlet Letter* derives from the fact that Hawthorne was a short story writer and that he found an editor who realized that he had material for a self-sustaining book. Before 1850, Hawthorne had

achieved a respectable reputation as a writer of short fiction. In fact, he made the short story an art form. The Scarlet Letter began as an extended short story, further expanded by editor James T. Fields's encouragement to a little over 250 uncrowded pages, not counting the 54-page introduction on the Salem, Massachusetts, Custom House (where Hawthorne worked as surveyor from 1846 to 1849). It was far shorter than the two- or three-volume English novels of the time. There was none of their rambling loquaciousness, designed to pass the hours of the bored upper-middle-class women and men who read novels both in England and America.

But Hawthorne's brevity is loaded. Though he could be chatty and timely in his essayistic style—as in the introductory "The Custom-House"—he exhibits the height of concentration in *The Scarlet Letter*. While Hawthorne followed Scott in style and in the romantic use of history, there are, in *The Scarlet Letter*, no subplots and no intrigues that require complicated explanations at the end. In fact, the physical action in the novel is minimal, most of it taking place before the novel begins. The opening and closing scenes at the scaffold are the only outwardly dramatic ones. Otherwise, the action proceeds in the minds and the words of the characters—with sufficient authorial narration and comment to direct the reader.

There are only four significant characters: Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale, Roger Chillingworth, and

little Pearl. They are simplified types—indeed, archetypes—of American character. But they develop morally and psychologically through the novel, and are not, as they would be in a short story, transformed by a single event.

Each episode of *The Scarlet Letter* is set concretely and dramatically. The scenes move almost imperceptibly from chapter to chapter, and they are all within walking distance of the prison, the scaffold, the market-place, and the meeting-house in the early town of Boston between 1645 and 1653. References to the wide world, before and after the main action of the plot, are enough to suggest that Hester—and Hawthorne—transcend the place and time.

The whole drama is done in black and red, but with the quite important green and partly sunny Chapters XIV to XIX, where Hester confronts each of the other characters in the natural settings of the seaside and the forest. Except for that pivotal interlude, the final tone of the novel is tragically bleak: "so somber is it, and relieved only by one ever-glowing point of light gloomier than the shadow:—`ON A FIELD SABLE, THE LETTER A, GULES.'"`

Hawthorne's use of symbolism is simplistic on the one hand, yet infinitely complex. The letter A stands for adultery, the violation of the Seventh Commandment in the code of Puritan New England. But the letter A had more significance for Hawthorne and for subsequent

readers. The letter A is the first letter of the alphabet. In the New England Primer, familiar to Hawthorne and to every schoolboy in New England since the 17th century, the letter was represented by the words: "In Adam's Fall/We sinned all"—with a woodcut of Adam and Eve on either side of a fruitful tree (of knowledge). We are all guilty, not of adultery, but of Adam's sin.

And the letter A can stand for more than adultery or Adam's fall. Hawthorne was not unaware of its implications, however much modern imagination may carry them to extremes. For example, A represents amour, art, ambiguity, allegory, America, and as far-fetched as these attributions appear, Hawthorne's open imagination would welcome them.

It is true that the letter A is overworked in the book, and the moral symbolism becomes wearisome. By the time the letter appears in the sky (or doesn't appear) in Chapter XII, we have had enough of it, and its appearance (or non-appearance) on Dimmesdale's naked breast in the penultimate chapter is more than enough. Hawthorne was working with something that had not been fully exploited, and he felt compelled to make it clear to his readers—whether Puritan prudes or devourers of sentimental love stories—that he was concerned with more than surface.

By the time the letter appears in the sky, Hawthorne has evolved what has been called his "ambiguity device." Did the letter appear in the sky or was it an apparition of those who chose to believe? Was Hester



guilty of anything beyond the transgression of the parochial beliefs of her immediate environment? Was her "sin" Christian and human love? Was she the noble heroine of a love story ordained in Heaven? Such ideas would be shocking—and were shocking—to many 19th-century readers. Hawthorne left them as questions.

The first chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*, entitled "The Prison Door," portends the whole. In the three short paragraphs of this chapter Hawthorne establishes the place and time of his narrative, fixing it in historical fact as well as in folklore. He sets the social-psychological mood of the people, the men in "sad-colored garments" assembled before the prison. He makes it visually real with concrete detail: "the wooden jail ... already marked with weather-stains" and with "rust on the ponderous iron-work of its oaken door." The prevailing color imagery of the novel is forecast in reference to the prison as "the black flower of civilized society," one of the "earliest practical necessities" in the settlement of a new colony. The black is in contrast with the implied, but unstated, red of the wild rose bush next to the prison door.

This rose bush, by a strange chance, has been kept alive in history; but whether it had merely survived out of the stern old wilderness, so long after the fall of the gigantic pines and oaks that originally overshadowed it,—or whether, as there is fair authority for believing, it had sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Ann Hutchinson, as she entered the prison-door,—we shall

not take upon us to determine. Finding it so directly on the threshold of our narrative, which is now about to issue from that inauspicious portal, we could hardly do otherwise than to pluck one of its flowers and present it to the reader. It may serve, let us hope, to symbolize some sweet moral blossom, that may be found along the track, or relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow.

That concluding paragraph of Chapter I states the symbolic intent of the author. Yet it is carefully ambiguous. The "sweet moral blossom" of *The Scarlet Letter* is that good grows out of evil. Hester's sin was a violation of contemporary social values. Recognizing this, she rose to a humble heroism.

Hawthorne did not say that she ascended to heavenly bliss, nor did he say that she was condemned to the fiery hell of Puritan damnation. He was too aware of his own human frailty to arrogate final judgment. He left it to his readers to recognize their own sinful humanity and their redeeming brotherhood—and sisterhood—with their fellow humans.

*Source Citation: Austin, James C. "The Scarlet Letter: Overview." Reference Guide to American Literature. Ed. Jim Kamp. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Detroit: St. James Press, 1994. Literature Resource Center. Gale.*

## **Discussion questions**

1. Hawthorne came from a long line of Puritans (one of his forefathers was a judge during the Salem witch trials), and Puritan beliefs about subjects like guilt, repression, original sin, and discipline inform the book on every level. What is your impression of how the Puritan worldview is taken up and treated by Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter*?"

2. Kathryn Harrison, in her Introduction to this volume, asserts that Hester Prynne can be seen in many ways as the first great modern heroine in American literature. Do you agree?

3. Dimmesdale is in many ways as central a character as Hester in the novel; for you as a reader, is he equally important to the story?

4. The highly charged symbolism of *The Scarlet Letter* is one of its most distinctive features. Discuss the central symbol of the story - the scarlet letter itself. What does it signify? How does it function in the novel? How does its meaning change over time?

5. Critics have sometimes disagreed about whether Hawthorne condones or condemns the adultery of Hester and Dimmesdale in the novel. Can either view be supported? Which do you feel is the case?

6. Describe and discuss the character of Roger Chillingworth in the novel. What does he represent in terms of the larger themes explored by the book?

7. How does Hester change over time in the novel-and how does she change in the eyes of the society around her?

8. The final scaffold scene brings the various themes, characters, and plotlines woven throughout the novel to a powerful conclusion. Describe your response to this scene, and to the disputed event that occurs near its end.

## **Multimedia**

“Hester Prynne: Sinner, Victim, Object, Winner”

Available through National Public Radio:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=87805369>

## **Readalikes**

*The Crucible: A play in four acts* by Arthur Miller

With the Salem witch trials as a background, a young woman seeks revenge against her married lover by accusing him and his wife of sorcery.

*Fortune's Rocks* by Anita Shreve

This coming of age tale is set at the turn of the century and concerns 15-year-old Olympia Biddeford, the

daughter of a prominent Boston family. While Olympia and her family spend the summer at their New Hampshire seaside retreat, Fortune's Rock, she falls in love with a man three times her age, the cultured, socially sensitive, and married, Dr. John Haskell. The scandal of their affair and Olympia's pregnancy results in her being sent to a convent and the baby being put up for adoption. In the rousing climax, Olympia rebounds and continues her rebellion against the straight-laced society by trying to gain her son back. Despite an anachronistic modern sensibility, there are many authentic period touches in this tale of reckless love and its consequences.

*Hester* by Christopher Bigsby

This first novel portrays the early life of Hester Prynne, introduced in the classic work *The Scarlet Letter*. The dark, morose style of Nathaniel Hawthorne is repeated in this tale as 19-year-old Hester first meets Roger Chillingworth. After Hester decides to leave Roger, she sails to America; her harrowing sea adventure includes her chance meeting with Arthur Dimmesdale. This work details those coincidences that set into play Hester's famous condemnation for sin.

*I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* by Maryse Conde

In this novel of early colonial life, Tituba, a slave who is the property of the minister of Salem, Massachusetts, is accused of and confesses to practicing witchcraft. She is imprisoned before being sold to pay for her chains

and keep. The novel is a gripping look at both slavery and witchcraft in the American colonies.



*Ann Arbor District Library*