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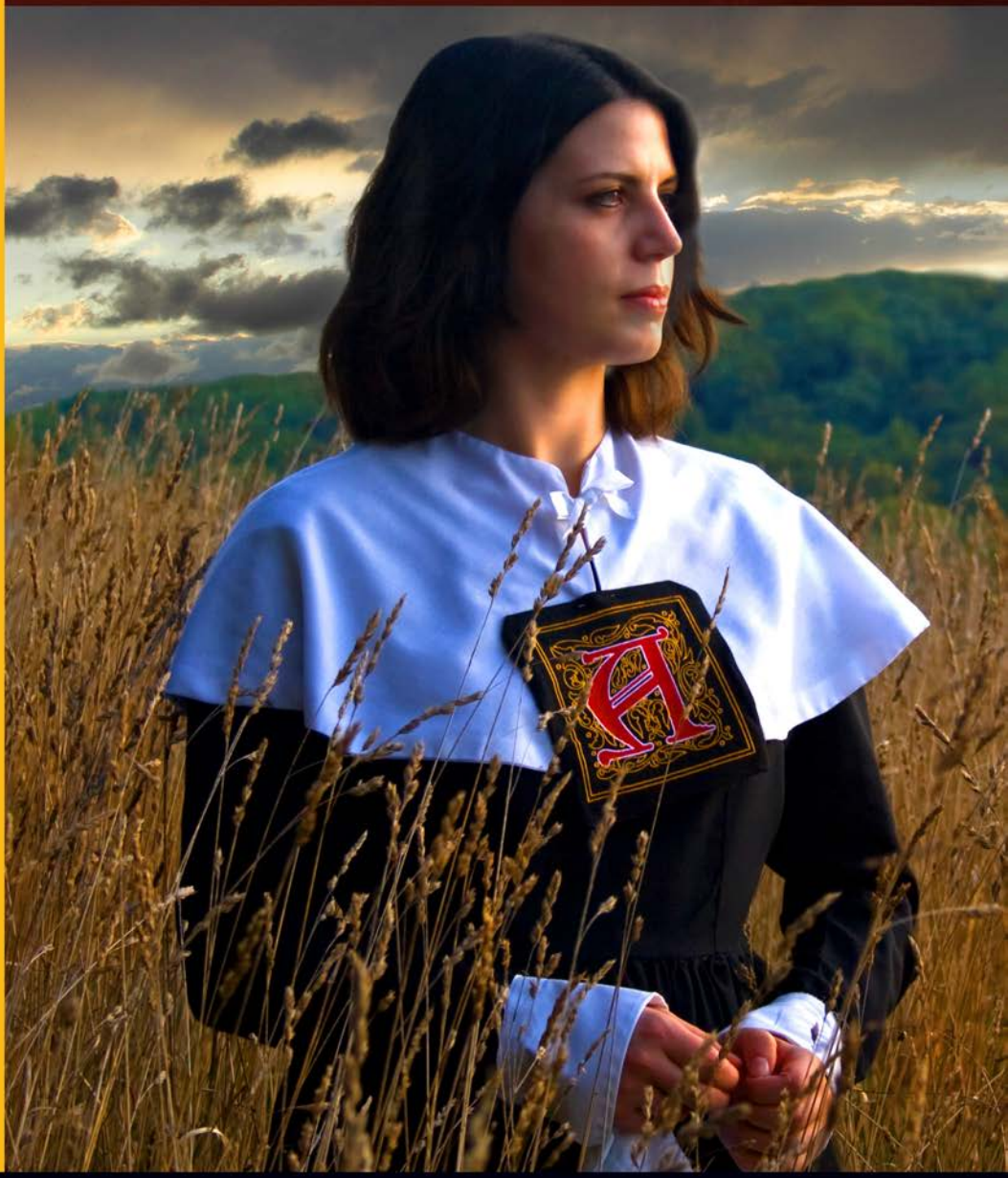
THE SCARLET LETTER

by Nathaniel Hawthorne



UNABRIDGED WITH GLOSSARY AND NOTES

The Scarlet Letter

Nathaniel Hawthorne

Prestwick House

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This Prestwick House edition, is a republication, with slight emendations, of *The Scarlet Letter,* published in 1892, by De Wolfe Fiske and Co., Boston

ISBN 978-1-58049-595-0

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Notes

What is a literary classic and why are these classic works important to the world?

A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that has something important to say about life and/or the human condition and says it with great artistry. A classic, through its enduring presence, has withstood the test of time and is not bound by time, place, or customs. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to people one hundred or more years ago, and as forcefully as it will speak to people of future generations. For this reason, a classic is said to have universality.

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) was born in Salem, Massachusetts, as Nathaniel Hathorne. He later added a *w* to his name, in part to avoid association with his Puritan ancestor, Judge John Hathorne, who was a judge in the notorious Salem witch trials.

Nathaniel Hawthorne was a shy man whose quiet nature was often mistaken for aloofness. After graduating from Bowdoin College in 1825, Hawthorne devoted much of his time to collecting New England ghost legends, peculiar stories, and historical information, especially those pertaining to Puritanism.

An active writer, Hawthorne published a novel called *Fanshawe* at his own expense in 1828. Over the next several years, he mainly wrote short stories, until the publication of his first moderately successful book, *Twice Told Tales*, in 1837. Hawthorne next took a job as inspector at the Boston Custom House, which left him little time for writing, but he left this position when the administration changed and joined an experimental Transcendentalist commune. In 1842, Hawthorne married Sophia Peabody.

The Scarlet Letter was published in 1849; it received critical acclaim, but did not enhance Hawthorne's financial status. Other novels followed: *The House of the Seven Gables* (1850), *The Snow Image* (1851), *Other Twice Told Tales* (1851), and *The Blithedale Romance* (1852). From 1853-1857,

READING POINTERS

Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights

1. To better appreciate *The Scarlet Letter*, we need to examine the symbols that Hawthorne uses:

   A. *The scarlet letter*. Having to wear the letter *A,* representing both adultery and adulteress, should carry only negative connotations for Hester. Hawthorne, however, places layers of complexity on this symbol, as he does with many other symbols in the book. Pay attention to the implications and repercussions of the letter on different characters, and note how the meaning of the letter changes as the novel progresses, especially how Hester comes to view it.

   B. *The prison*. Characters are imprisoned both physically and psychologically. Compare the various forms of imprisonment and determine their effects on the characters.

   C. *The scaffold*. Study the significance of the four scenes that take place on and around the scaffold. Note how the platform serves as a place for both moral judgment and repentance.

   D. *Nature*. Free of human and social mores, the forest is a sanctuary from puritanical judgment and persecution, and it is also a place where truths are revealed. Pearl seems to be happiest when she plays in the forest.

The Custom-House

THE CUSTOM-HOUSE[†]

Introductory to "The Scarlet Letter"

IT IS A LITTLE remarkable, that—though disinclined to talk overmuch of myself and my affairs at the fireside, and to my personal friends—an autobiographical impulse should twice in my life have taken possession of me, in addressing the public. The first time was three or four years since, when I favoured the reader—inexcusably, and for no earthly reason, that either the indulgent reader or the intrusive author could imagine—with a description of my way of life in the deep quietude of an Old Manse. And now—because, beyond my deserts, I was happy enough to find a listener or two on the former occasion—I again seize the public by the button, and talk of my three years' experience in a Custom-House. The example of the famous "P. P. , Clerk of this Parish," was never more faithfully followed. The truth seems to be, however, that, when he casts his leaves forth upon the wind, the author addresses, not the many who will fling aside his volume, or never take it up, but the few who will understand him, better than most of his schoolmates or lifemates. Some authors, indeed, do far more than this, and indulge themselves in such confidential depths of revelation as could fittingly be addressed, only and exclusively, to the one heart and mind of perfect sympathy; as if the printed book, thrown at large on the wide world, were certain to find out the divided segment of the writer's

[†]Terms marked in the text with ([†]) can be looked up in the Glossary for additional information.

own nature, and complete his circle of existence by bringing him into communion with it. It is scarcely decorous, however, to speak all, even where we speak impersonally. But—as thoughts are frozen and utterance benumbed, unless the speaker stand in some true relation with his audience, it may be pardonable to imagine that a friend, a kind and apprehensive, though not the closest friend, is listening to our talk; and then, a native reserve being thawed by this genial consciousness, we may prate of the circumstances that lie around us, and even of ourself, but still keep the inmost Me behind its veil. To this extent and within these limits, an author, methinks, may be autobiographical, without violating either the reader's rights or his own.

It will be seen, likewise, that this Custom-House sketch has a certain propriety, of a kind always recognised in literature, as explaining how a large portion of the following pages came into my possession, and as offering proofs of the authenticity of a narrative therein contained. This, in fact,—a desire to put myself in my true position as editor, or very little more, of the most prolix among the tales that make up my volume,—this, and no other, is my true reason for assuming a personal relation with the public. In accomplishing the main purpose, it has appeared allowable, by a few extra touches, to give a faint representation of a mode of life not heretofore described, together with some of the characters that move in it, among whom the author happened to make one.

In my native town of Salem, at the head of what, half a century ago, in the days of old King Derby, was a bustling wharf,—but which is now burdened with decayed wooden warehouses, and exhibits few or no symptoms of commercial life; except, perhaps, a bark or brig, half-way down its melancholy length, discharging hides; or, nearer at hand, a Nova Scotia schooner, pitching out her cargo of firewood,—at the head, I say, of this dilapidated wharf, which the tide often overflows, and along which, at the base and in the rear of the row of buildings, the track of many languid years is seen in a border of unthrifty grass,—here, with a view from its front windows adown this not very enlivening prospect, and thence across the harbour, stands a spacious edifice of brick. From the loftiest point of its roof, during precisely three and a half hours of each forenoon, floats or droops, in breeze or calm, the banner of the republic; but with the thirteen stripes turned vertically, instead of horizontally, and thus indicating that a civil, and not a military post of Uncle Sam's government, is here established. Its front is ornamented with a portico of half a dozen wooden pillars, supporting a balcony, beneath which a flight of wide granite steps descends towards the street. Over the entrance hovers an enormous specimen of the American eagle, with outspread wings, a shield before her breast, and, if I recollect aright, a bunch of intermingled thunderbolts and barbed arrows in each claw. With the customary infirmity of temper that characterises this unhappy fowl, she appears, by the fierceness of her beak and eye and the general

truculency of her attitude, to threaten mischief to the inoffensive community; and especially to warn all citizens, careful of their safety, against intruding on the premises which she overshadows with her wings. Nevertheless, vixenly as she looks, many people are seeking, at this very moment, to shelter themselves under the wing of the federal eagle; imagining, I presume, that her bosom has all the softness and snugness of an eider-down pillow. But she has no great tenderness, even in her best of moods, and, sooner or later,—oftener soon than late,—is apt to fling off her nestlings with a scratch of her claw, a dab of her beak, or a rankling wound from her barbed arrows.

The pavement round about the above-described edifice—which we may as well name at once as the Custom-House of the port—has grass enough growing in its chinks to show that it has not, of late days, been worn by any multitudinous resort of business. In some months of the year, however, there often chances a forenoon when affairs move onward with a livelier tread. Such occasions might remind the elderly citizen of that period, before the last war with England, when Salem was a port by itself; not scorned, as she is now, by her own merchants and ship-owners, who permit her wharves to crumble to ruin, while their ventures go to swell, needlessly and imperceptibly, the mighty flood of commerce at New York or Boston.† On some such morning, when three or four vessels happen to have arrived at once,—usually from Africa or South America,—or to be on the verge of their departure thitherward, there is a sound of frequent feet, passing briskly up and down the granite steps. Here, before his own wife has greeted him, you may greet the sea-flushed ship-master, just in port, with his vessel's papers under his arm in a tarnished tin box. Here, too, comes his owner, cheerful or sombre, gracious or in the sulks, accordingly as his scheme of the now accomplished voyage has been realised in merchandise that will readily be turned to gold, or has buried him under a bulk of incommodities, such as nobody will care to rid him of. Here, likewise,—the germ of the wrinkle-browed, grizzly-bearded, careworn merchant,—we have the smart young clerk, who gets the taste of traffic as a wolf-cub does of blood, and already sends adventures in his master's ships, when he had better be sailing mimic boats upon a mill-pond. Another figure in the scene is the outward-bound sailor, in quest of a protection; or the recently arrived one, pale and feeble, seeking a passport to the hospital. Nor must we forget the captains of the rusty little schooners that bring firewood from the British provinces; a rough-looking set of tarpaulins, without the alertness of the Yankee† aspect, but contributing an item of no slight importance to our decaying trade.

Cluster all these individuals together, as they sometimes were, with other miscellaneous ones to diversify the group, and, for the time being, it made the Custom-House a stirring scene. More frequently, however, on ascending the steps, you would discern—in the entry, if it were summer time, or in their

appropriate rooms, if wintry or inclement weather—a row of venerable figures, sitting in old-fashioned chairs, which were tipped on their hind legs back against the wall. Oftentimes they were asleep, but occasionally might be heard talking together, in voices between a speech and a snore, and with that lack of energy that distinguishes the occupants of alms-houses, and all other human beings who depend for subsistence on charity, on monopolised labour, or any thing else but their own independent exertions. These old gentlemen—seated, like Matthew† at the receipt of custom, but not very liable to be summoned thence, like him, for apostolic errands—were Custom-House officers.

Furthermore, on the left hand as you enter the front door is a certain room or office, about fifteen feet square, and of a lofty height; with two of its arched windows commanding a view of the aforesaid dilapidated wharf, and the third looking across a narrow lane, and along a portion of Derby Street. All three give glimpses of the shops of grocers, block-makers, slop-sellers, and ship-chandlers; around the doors of which are generally to be seen, laughing and gossiping, clusters of old salts, and such other wharf-rats as haunt the Wapping of a seaport. The room itself is cobwebbed, and dingy with old paint; its floor is strewn with grey sand, in a fashion that has elsewhere fallen into long disuse; and it is easy to conclude, from the general slovenliness of the place, that this is a sanctuary into which womankind, with her tools of magic, the broom and mop, has very infrequent access. In the way of furniture, there is a stove with a voluminous funnel; an old pine desk, with a three-legged stool beside it; two or three wooden-bottom chairs, exceedingly decrepit and infirm; and,—not to forget the library,—on some shelves, a score or two of volumes of the Acts of Congress, and a bulky Digest of the Revenue Laws. A tin pipe ascends through the ceiling, and forms a medium of vocal communication with other parts of the edifice. And here, some six months ago,—pacing from corner to corner, or lounging on the long-legged stool, with his elbow on the desk, and his eyes wandering up and down the columns of the morning newspaper,—you might have recognised, honoured reader, the same individual who welcomed you into his cheery little study, where the sunshine glimmered so pleasantly through the willow branches, on the western side of the Old Manse. But now, should you go thither to seek him, you would inquire in vain for the Loco-foco Surveyor. The besom of reform has swept him out of office; and a worthier successor wears his dignity and pockets his emoluments.

This old town of Salem—my native place, though I have dwelt much away from it, both in boyhood and maturer years—possesses, or did possess, a hold on my affections, the force of which I have never realised during my seasons of actual residence here. Indeed, so far as its physical aspect is concerned, with its flat, unvaried surface, covered chiefly with wooden houses, few or none of which pretend to architectural beauty,—its irregularity, which is neither

Glossary

The Custom-House—Introductory

Custom-House – a building where ships are cleared for docking and departure, and where customs are paid; in *The Scarlet Letter,* the section about the Custom-House adds authenticity and believability to the story. Hawthorne can claim that the story is true because he found the letter and the diary.

Boston – The major events of *The Scarlet Letter* take place in and about the colony of Boston in the middle of the seventeenth century. Hawthorne tried to make sure that references to the governors, ministers, and practices of the colony during that time were historically accurate.

Matthew – a reference to the first Gospel of the Bible

Yankee – a native or inhabitant of New England

Puritanic – Puritanism emerged as a powerful religious and political force in sixteenth-century England. Certain Protestants were not satisfied with the reform of church doctrine that resulted from Henry VIII's break with Rome over his divorce from Katherine of Aragon. These people became known as Puritans because they wanted the church to revert to its pure state, or as it was established in the first century A.D. Many New England Puritans were descended from the pilgrims who traveled from England to the New World to escape religious persecution. A major belief was that any deviation from strict biblical teachings would bring the wrath of God on the community, so sin was strictly prohibited and punished.

Quakers – members of the Society of Friends, a Christian sect founded by George Fox in England during the late seventeenth century; Quakers are strongly opposed to violence and have no formal creeds, rites, or clergy.

Whigs – members of an American political party that began in the nineteenth century; the party opposed the Democratic Party and promoted the protection of industry and limitation on the power of the executive branch of government.

Boreas – According to Greek mythology, Boreas is the god of the north wind.

Ticonderoga – a fort in northeast New York, seized from the British in 1775

Chippewa – a North American Indian tribe, also known as the Ojibwa

sailors – The arrival of the sailors puts Hester's situation into perspective. When outsiders arrive at the small Massachusetts colony, Hester's sin seems less severe and insignificant in relation to the rest of the world.

Emerson – Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), an American poet and Transcendentalist; Transcendentalism is a philosophy that seeks to discover the nature of reality through spiritual intuition. Emerson left his career as a Unitarian minister to become a writer and public speaker, and he is the

Vocabulary

The Custom-House—Introductory to "The Scarlet Letter"
alacrity – eagerness
alms-house – a poorhouse
anthracite – a type of coal
balustrade – a rail or low barrier
besom – a broom
chirography – penmanship
cumbrous – difficult to manage
emoluments – salary, wages
esoteric – known or understood only by a select group of people
foolscap – a type of writing paper
gourmandism – an appreciation for fine food and drink
indolent – idle, lazy
lucubrations – serious meditation, contemplation; writing produced with serious effort or study (usually considered pretentious)
polemical – an argument
portico – a porch or covered walkway
prate – to chatter
progenitor – an ancestor
prolix – wordy, long-winded
Providence – the supervision or guidance of God
sepulchers – graves, tombs
talisman – a magical charm
tarpaulins – waterproof materials
tempestuous – violent, vehement
tide-waiters – customs officials
truculency – rudeness
vicissitude – a condition of constant change
winter-green – a creeping evergreen shrub

Chapter I
—

Chapter II
farthingale – a hoop worn by women to support skirts or petticoats
ignominy – shame, dishonor
malefactresses – female criminals
pillory – a wooden board with holes for the head and hands that was used to subject criminals to public humiliation
sumptuary – the regulating of monetary extravagance