The Scarlet Letter

AN ANNOTATED TEXT
BACKGROUNDS AND SOURCES
ESSAYS IN CRITICISM

EDITED BY SCULLEY BRADLEY
RICHMOND CROOM BEATTY AND E. HUDSON LONG.

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

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89

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Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne brooded a long while on the theme of this masterpiece. Thirteen years earlier, in "Endicott and the Red Cross" (1837), his prototype for Hester Prynne wore "the letter A on the breast of her gown," and "the lost and desperate creature had embroidered the fatal token in scarlet cloth, with golden thread and the nicest art of needlework." Again in 1844 he entered the following reminder in a notebook: "The life of a woman who, by an old colony [Plymouth] law, was condemned always to wear the letter A, sewed on her garment, in token of her having committed adultery." Three years later, perhaps thinking of the husband of such a woman, he noted his desire to write "a story of the effects of revenge, diabolizing him who indulges in it."

On June 8, 1849, when he lost his political appointment in the Salem Customhouse, Hawthorne was nearly forty-five and knew that his ephemeral reputation as a writer of tales would not support a family. But Sophia Hawthorne produced her meager savings and told her husband, "Now you can write your book." Mrs. Hawthorne estimated his daily stint at nine hours and added in a note to her mother, "I am almost frightened about it. But he is well now and looks very shining."

On February 3, 1850, he read her the concluding chapters, and as he later wrote a friend, "It broke her heart and sent her to bed with a grievous headache, which I look upon as a triumphant success."

On March 16, 1850, the novel was published in Boston by Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, who wisely dissuaded him from including a few short tales for variety, excepting only his sketch, "The Custom-House," which introduces the novel, and is included in this edition.

The Scarlet Letter has become an acknowledged masterpiece of modern world literature. For more than a century, and for countless readers, it has continued to express the symbolic terms of a persistent, dark riddle in the American spiritual experience. As Randall Stewart has pointed out, Hawthorne constantly invites the reader to comprehend the larger meanings. Words like "type" and "symbol" recur often: Hester is a "type of sin"; weeds growing on a grave "typify some hideous secret"; the rosebush at the prison door "may symbolize some sweet moral blossom"; Pearl is "herself a symbol." At times the emotional experience transcends physical actuality, as in the

forest scene where the sunshine follows Pearl but avoids Hester.

Hawthorne, of course, intended this extension of the imagination to occur; his sensibility was attuned to the inward life of man, for which overt acts were but cryptic significations, and for which the outward, physical appearances of nature and the creations of mankind were at best only a meaningful simulacrum. Instead of the realist's direct transcription of life, Hawthorne employed a continuous system of symbolic suggestion, which clarified the "larger meanings" beyond the power of immediate action or dialogue to express. He called his book "a romance," as it truly is, not because it is an idealization but because its vision turns inward upon the mysterious realities of the human soul.

The novel's significant structure is analyzed in the first footnote to Chapter XII.

The text of *The Scarlet Letter* here printed is that of the first edition (March, 1850). To this the editors have prefixed Hawthorne's brief Preface to the second edition, for its historical interest. Recent evidence concerning the texts of the novel has supported Professor Randall Stewart's earlier conjecture that Hawthorne did not make any textual revision beyond the first edition, and that he did not read the proof of the second edition, which appeared in April. It is quite unlikely that Hawthorne corrected the proof of the third edition, printed in September, 1850, from stereotyped plates which perpetuated obvious errors of the second edition and added others. Although the third has, in general, remained the standard edition, evidence supports the first edition as the honored text.

Following the text of the novel itself, we have reproduced an unusual group of background and source materials, including selections from Hawthorne's own notebooks and journals and from historical works; articles which illustrate the manner in which scholars have made use of these documents; and Hawthorne's early short story, "Endicott and the Red Cross" (1837).

The last section of this Critical Edition includes a number of critical articles, which manifest the pleasure that their authors experienced in studying this long-admired classic, in pondering its core of meanings and its many nuances. In selecting them, the editors have had in mind the student primarily interested in the book itself and in its elucidation as a work of art. These critical selections represent a wide range of opinion and method in various periods of time. They were not intended to illustrate a history of the criticism, although the chronological arrangement shows in a broad way the evolution of certain interesting perceptions about Hawthorne and his book. We have assembled the best articles we knew, hoping that each has the creative value to suffuse with under-

standing the novel itself and the cultures in the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries that produced it. The student is asked to read this literature freshly for himself, and to develop his own interests and insights. For further study we have included a selective bibliography.

S. B., R. C. B., E. H. L.

A Note on the Texts and Documentation

Since the editors share the concern for the teaching of scholarly fidelity in the documentation of research work, we list here the editorial principles we have followed in reproducing the source materials and critical essays included in this Critical Edition. The text for each selection is printed from a photographic facsimile of the original publication, and, in each case, the footnote numbers are those of the original. The first footnote for each title is a bibliographical record of the item, giving its source and the original page numbers. Occasional additional footnotes supplied by the editors are indicated by a dagger (†) and the bracketed word "[Editors]." Titles of selections not original with their authors have been enclosed in brackets.

The majority of the articles have been printed in their entirety. Where matter irrelevant to this book has been excluded, the deletion is indicated by three asterisks; where a deletion is extensive, we have usually noted the general subject of the deleted material.

The editors have not, in this Critical Edition, followed the practice of indicating the pagination of each original document within the texts as here printed. In our opinion, the principle to be taught is the scrupulous documentation of the present source of reference, whether it be the first or later edition or a transcript. The citation of the original source, if possible, should also be included for the benefit of others who may be able to consult it. In the use of this Critical Edition for documented themes, the researcher could be advised, in his first reference to any article in the collection, to give the location, the date, and the pagination of the original as shown in our first footnote, followed by the number of the page in the Critical Edition on which the quoted or designated matter appears. A second reference to the same article could be abbreviated to the author's name, with or without a short title, followed by the page number in the Critical Edition.

Contents

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The Text of
The Scarlet Letter

Contents

The Scarlet Letter

A ROMANCE

Preface to Second Edition[1]

Much to the author's surprise, and (if he may say so without additional offence) considerably to his amusement, he finds that his sketch of official life, introductory to *The Scarlet Letter*, has created an unprecedented excitement in the respectable community immediately around him.[2] It could hardly have been more violent, indeed, had he burned down the Custom-House, and quenched its last smoking ember in the blood of a certain venerable personage, against whom he is supposed to cherish a peculiar malevolence.[3] As the public disapprobation would weigh very heavily on him, were he conscious of deserving it, the author begs leave to say, that he has carefully read over the introductory pages, with a purpose to alter or expunge whatever might be found amiss, and to make the best reparation in his power for the atrocities of which he has been adjudged guilty. But it appears to him, that the

1. Although the text here given is that of the first edition, the editors have added Hawthorne's Preface to the second edition for its historical interest.

2. That is, Salem, Massachusetts, his birthplace, where Hawthorne had recently lost his position in the Custom-house (1849) because of a Whig victory in the Presidential election of Zachary Taylor. Hawthorne's sketches of his former Whig colleagues drew fire at once from the local press. Randall Stewart, in his *Hawthorne,* quotes a blast from the Salem *Register,* a Whig paper, dated March 21, 1850: "Hawthorne seeks to vent his spite * * * by small sneers at Salem, and by vilifying some of his former associates, to a degree of which we should have supposed any gentleman * * * incapable * * * The most venomous, malignant, and unaccountable assault is made upon a venerable gentleman, whose chief crime seems to be that he loves a good dinner."

3. The Reverend Charles Wentworth Upham of Salem, a power among the Massachusetts Whigs, whom Senator Charles Sumner called "that smooth, smiling, oily man of God," brought about Hawthorne's dismissal, and the latter, who thought him "the most satisfactory villain that ever was," probably portrayed him as the arrogant Judge Pyncheon of *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851).

only remarkable features of the sketch are its frank and genuine good-humor, and the general accuracy with which he has conveyed his sincere impressions of the characters therein described. As to enmity, or ill-feeling of any kind, personal or political, he utterly disclaims such motives. The sketch might, perhaps, have been wholly omitted, without loss to the public, or detriment to the book; but, having undertaken to write it, he conceives that it could not have been done in a better or a kindlier spirit, nor, so far as his abilities availed, with a livelier effect of truth.

The author is constrained, therefore, to republish his introductory sketch without the change of a word.[4]

SALEM, March 30, 1850.

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 favored 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.[5] 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,"[6] 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 and life-mates. 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 per-

4. Probably literally true, but nevertheless certain changes, due to editorial or printers' error, appeared in the second edition.

5. Hawthorne completed *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846) in the homestead of the Emerson family, where the Hawthornes settled after their marriage. Hawthorne's "autobiographical impulse" was displayed in the introductory essay, "The Author Makes the Reader Acquainted with his Abode," and in the sketch entitled "The Old Manse."

6. The *Memoirs of P. P., Clerk of this Parish,* an early eighteenth-century mock autobiography, was published anonymously, as were other satires emanating from the so-called "Scriblerus Club" of Pope, Swift, Thomas Parnell, Dr. John Arbuthnot, and John Gay. "P. P." satirically parodies the tedious, digressive autobiography of Bishop Gilbert Burnet, *A History of His Own Times* (1723).

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