“背景中的文学”丛书

Understanding The Scarlet Letter

A Stuent Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents

《红字》解读

[美] 克劳迪娅·德斯特·约翰逊 著
(Claudia Durst Johnson)

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Introduction

The nineteenth century was a time of great prudishness in America. Women's dresses came all the way to the ground, and to allow a gentleman to glimpse a black-stockinged ankle while climbing into or out of a horse carriage, by accident or on purpose, was to risk getting a reputation for moral looseness. Similarly, a genteel young lady risked losing her good name permanently if she were ever discovered to have spent time alone in the company of a man who was not a relative. It was called the Age of the Euphemism, when so-called prettier, "nicer" words were coined or substituted for "unpleasant" ones: the word "limb" seemed nicer than "leg"; "white meat" on a cooked chicken seemed more genteel than the older term, "breast"; a drunk person was invariably described as being "unwell" and a dead person as having "passed away." The prudishness of the age would lead Nathaniel Hawthorne's widow, Sophia, to erase completely his rather tame journal description of a prostitute before allowing it to be published. So it is no surprise that many pious readers and critics in the nineteenth century found Hawthorne's first novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, to be shocking and unfit for publication—not only because of its subject, but because of his treatment of it. Hawthorne tells the story of a married woman who has a child by someone other than her husband. She keeps the child, raising it herself in the community where her sit-

uation is known, never revealing the name of her lover. Many critics found the novel objectionable because her secret lover is the saintly, idolized young minister of the community, because they didn't believe the adulterers were ever really sorry for what they had done, and because the author seemed to be sympathizing with them rather than frowning on their actions.

Even in the last decades of the twentieth century, issues raised by *The Scarlet Letter* are still controversial. In our much more tolerant age, when huge numbers of children are raised by single mothers, the controversy rages on over whether children should be reared without fathers and whether society is doing enough to discourage the increasingly high percentage of out-of-wedlock births. Respected men of God, like Hawthorne's minister, the Reverend Dimmesdale, have created public commotions with sexual misconduct fully as scandalous as that in *The Scarlet Letter*. None have been more notorious than those created by two famous televangelists in the late 1980s. And *The Scarlet Letter* is pertinent to other timely issues: corporal punishment, the separation of church and state, and child custody—all of which have been hot topics in the 1990s.

Despite its shocking subject matter, *The Scarlet Letter* entered the canon of American masterpieces almost from its first appearance in 1850 and has remained there for over 140 years. No college course in nineteenth-century American fiction is complete without it. And though its subject matter was once considered inappropriate for secondary school students, it is now one of the ten most frequently read novels in junior and senior high schools in the United States. Another illustration of its popularity is the frequency with which the novel is dramatized for film and stage. In the 1970s the National Endowment for the Humanities funded a highly publicized and carefully researched production of *The Scarlet Letter* that attracted one of public television's largest audiences. Summer stock theatrical companies, in New England in particular, mounted successful adaptations of *The Scarlet Letter* with regularity in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1994 a major motion picture of *The Scarlet Letter* was planned starring Demi Moore, a respected and popular young box office attraction.

As might be expected, in the years since its first appearance *The Scarlet Letter* has been one of the most frequently analyzed works of American literature and one of those novels chosen most often

as the subject of doctoral dissertations. Literary critics have studied it in the context of Hawthorne's life, in the context of themes in his other works, as a reflection of nineteenth-century social history, and in its historical context of Puritanism. It has been examined from every conceivable point of view: the religious, the psychological, the mythological, the historical, and the sociological. It has even been the subject of an article in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. This interest is a testament to the richness and variety of human exchange and intellectual breadth offered by the novel.

The Scarlet Letter contains universal themes concerned with, among other things, fate, free will, and human nature. As a story of the settlement of America, it also has a thoroughly national theme. New England Puritanism was a natural topic for Nathaniel Hawthorne to undertake, for his family had been at the center of developments in America's early history from the days of the Puritans' reign in New England. One ancestor lives in historical annals as a persecutor of Quakers, and another as one of the investigating magistrates and then a judge in the Salem witch trials. In *The Scarlet Letter*, as in many of Hawthorne's shorter works, he makes abundant use of the Puritan past: its peculiar exclusionary religion, its harsh code of law, its preoccupation with sex and witchcraft. He often incorporates into his fiction figures from American history: Anne Hutchinson, who was tried for heresy by the Puritans; Governor Bellingham, and his sister, Mistress Hibbins, who was executed for witchcraft; the Reverend Wilson, who figured in the persecution of Quakers; John Endicott, who was once governor of the territory; Roger Williams, who was expelled from the Massachusetts Bay Colony; and many others.

At the same time, *The Scarlet Letter* has as much to say about the history of Nathaniel Hawthorne's own time as about the seventeenth century of his Puritan ancestors. Imbedded in the story of Hester Prynne are nineteenth-century controversies about what constitutes human nature (Is it basically good or bad?), about the nature and place of women, about sexual repression, child-rearing, and fictional art. The autobiographical preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, entitled "The Custom-House" (about Hawthorne's mundane job in a government office, which interferes with his real vocation as a writer), makes unmistakable the connection between the seventeenth-century setting of the novel and Hawthorne's own day. For these reasons, the novel is an invaluable key

to American history, and American history is an invaluable key to *The Scarlet Letter*. With this in mind, the foundation of this study of the novel is largely interdisciplinary; historical, theological, biographical, literary, and sociological documents are brought to bear on the fiction.

The first chapter is a literary analysis of *The Scarlet Letter*, with attention given to the meanings of the central symbol as they are manifested in the interactions of the four main characters and the Puritan community. The novel lends itself to such a study, which makes little reference to elements outside the fiction, because it is so tightly structured and so carefully balanced. Hawthorne seems to have chosen every word with great care, and there are no digressions, unnecessary bits of dialogue, or superfluous descriptions. He never wanders from the main themes of his fiction.

Chapters 2 through 6 focus on the novel's historical context and issues: the seventeenth-century Puritan background; the place of the wilderness and nature; the Puritans' code of crime and punishment; their basic beliefs and habits of mind; the Antinomian controversy involving Anne Hutchinson; and the witchcraft trials of 1692.

Chapters 7 and 8 are historical in a biographical sense; they examine the preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, for the "complete" *Scarlet Letter* is more than the Puritan-era story of Hester Prynne. Both novel and preface can be read as separate works that stand on their own. Essential links will be made between *The Scarlet Letter* and "The Custom-House," that is to say, the characters in Hester Prynne's seventeenth-century story and the nineteenth-century narrator in the introductory sketch who resembles Nathaniel Hawthorne. To complete this picture, one must also take into account the strong influence on the novel of Hawthorne's own family past in Puritan times, his own life as an artist, and the negative attitude toward fiction with which he had to struggle.

Chapter 9 examines twentieth-century issues pertinent to *The Scarlet Letter*, with emphasis on the unwed mother and the immoral clergyman.

Excerpts from a variety of documents, all bearing on issues related to *The Scarlet Letter*, are included here:

- two literary studies
- bodies of law from the seventeenth century

- historical reports
- private journals
- nineteenth-century magazine articles
- lines of poetry
- sketches
- newspaper stories

Each of the major topics and each document or set of documents is introduced by an essay linking it to *The Scarlet Letter*. Some topics or sections include chronologies. Also included are topics for written or oral exploration, suggestions for further reading, bibliographies, and a glossary of terms.

Chapter 1 is intended to inspire close readings of *The Scarlet Letter*, to help the reader develop a thorough familiarity with the text itself. Chapters 2 through 6 provide the reader with information about America's past, especially that Puritanism with which Hawthorne himself was thoroughly familiar and out of which he fashioned his historical novel. The author's choice of material and his adaptation of it for his art throw light on the meaning of the work. The material presented in Chapters 7 and 8 reveal the various nineteenth-century forces at work on the author's life and art. Chapter 9, by examining issues from *The Scarlet Letter* and Puritan history that remain current in the twentieth century, illustrates the universality of the novel.

The introductory essays are designed to place the documents that follow in context, to give the reader sufficient information to make sense of the primary material. In most cases, the documents should be augmented by supplemental readings in Hawthorne which reflect his further use of the same historical materials. The projects and questions that follow each group of documents have no "right" or "wrong" answers. Instead they are designed to encourage the reader to engage the material and think for himself or herself.

Numbers in parentheses in the text refer to the Signet Classic edition of *The Scarlet Letter* (1959) and the Library of America collection of Hawthorne's *Tales and Sketches* (1982).

Whenever possible, older spellings have been retained to give the reader a sense of the language at the time. However, some spelling has been modified for greater ease of comprehension.

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1

A Literary Analysis of *The Scarlet Letter*

The Scarlet Letter is one of those novels that so often lingers on the library shelf like a collection of sermons: forbidding, leather-bound, perhaps embossed with gold. We approach it reluctantly, not as a pleasure, but more as a challenge and a duty. It is a book we feel we ***should*** read—one of these days—if not to strengthen our character, then certainly to round out our education.

Yet, as the introduction suggests, beneath Hawthorne's genteel nineteenth-century language is no humdrum story, but one considered indecent by many readers of his time. Furthermore, the novel raises issues that are just as controversial today as they were two hundred years ago.

The story is simple and dramatic. A young and beautiful woman, Hester Prynne, bound by marriage to an old man supposedly somewhere far away or perhaps even dead, has an illicit—adulterous—affair with an unknown member of the small frontier village to which she has gone. There is no way for her to hide the affair, for she becomes pregnant with a child, and is imprisoned for her sin. The actual narrative begins after the child is born, on the day she emerges from prison to begin enduring her public punishment. The aging husband (much too old for the healthy young bride) comes out of the forest into town on this very day—to see his lovely (and lonely) wife standing on the public scaffold with

an "A" for adultery sewn on her dress and a baby in her arms. The wife refuses to reveal the name of her lover, and promises her husband that she will help him keep his identity secret from the community as well.

That is the situation when the story begins. But what, in reality, is *The Scarlet Letter* "about"? It has all the ingredients of a soap opera, but it is far more than that. It could be a Puritan sermon, but it is surely not that, for the Puritans are not the heroes here. It is a story of passion, but the reader never sees what we would call an explicit sexual scene.

It is about the *consequences* of breaking the moral code, in this case a moral law. What happens to human beings as a result of such transgressions?

It is also about failing to be true to human nature. There are, in fact, many failings in this story: the failure of the Puritans; of the leaders; of the young wife, who thinks charitable actions coming from an uncharitable heart will make up for her moment of illicit passion; of the minister, her lover, who lies first to his community and then to himself; of the cold old man who seeks to ruin his young wife's lover.

It is a story about a terrible and cruel revenge worked out as the wronged old husband (who never reveals his true identity or his purpose) slowly injects his poison into the minds and the lives of all those around him.

It is about the hypocrisy of members of a community who refuse to acknowledge that each of them is just as human, just as subject to passionate feelings as the woman they label an adulterer. If any novelist, any book can be said to have ripped the mask off Puritan pretensions, it is this writer, this book.

The Scarlet Letter is also about creativity—a person's attempt to see his or her own artistic side survive in a community that disapproves of the use of the imagination.

Furthermore, *The Scarlet Letter* is one of the earliest psychological novels in modern literature. It is one of the first works of fiction to probe the underside of human character—what lies unseen and unsaid beneath the surface.

This story of passion and chaos is highly structured. Its action begins and ends on the scaffold in the Boston marketplace. At the exact center of the novel is another scaffold scene, set in the middle of the night. The first half of the novel is an examination, first,

of Hester, as she attempts to live with her punishment, and then of Dimmesdale, who attempts to live with his guilt and with his companion, Chillingworth, who has successfully kept his relation to Hester secret. In the middle of the first half of the novel is a key scene in which Hester has to defend her right to keep her child.

The second half of the novel includes a look at what seven years have done to each of the lovers. The key middle scene takes place between the lovers in the forest.

Despite its multiplicity of subjects and themes, Hawthorne's novel is surprisingly focused on the scarlet letter itself, an image which, while fraught with many meanings—all of which bear on the overarching moral, "Be true!"—remains steadily at the center of the work as a representative of Truth.

THE MEANINGS OF THE SCARLET LETTER

To get at the many meanings of the scarlet letter, it is useful to see, first, how it is represented in the child Pearl, who, the author tells us, is a little scarlet letter herself. Then the discussion will turn to the letter's meaning for the community, and finally, to its specific relationship to Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth.

While the letter has many *implied* meanings, it also has particular and explicit meanings. The first and most obvious is that Hester's "A" stands for adultery and, as the narrator puts it, "women's frailty and sinful passion" (83). But the "A" on her breast begins to represent different things as Hester's story unfolds. For example, as a result of her charitable acts in the community, some people begin to think the "A" stands for able. And when the community sees a scarlet "A" in the sky on the night of John Winthrop's death, they believe it stands for angel. So, in the course of the novel, the "A" seems to encompass the entire range of human beingness, from the earthly and passionate "adulteress" to the pure and spiritual "angel," taking into account everything in between.

One begins to see many other human elements that the scarlet letter represents as the novel moves along. Pearl, for example, who is neither adulteress nor angel, is described as the living scarlet letter, and she embodies a full range of human characteristics: "Pearl's aspect was imbued with a spell of infinite variety; in this

one child there were many children, comprehending the full scope between the wild-flower prettiness of a peasant baby, and the pomp, in little, of an infant princess" (92). Furthermore, Hester begins to sense that many people besides herself wear scarlet letters on their breasts, even those with reputations for piety and purity:

> Could they be other than the insidious whispers of the bad angel, who would fain have persuaded the struggling woman, as yet only half his victim, that the outward guise of purity was but a lie, and that, if truth were everywhere to be shown, a scarlet letter would blaze forth on many a bosom besides Hester Prynne's? . . . Sometimes the red infamy upon her breast would give a sympathetic throb, as she passed near a venerable minister or magistrate, the model of piety and justice, to whom that age of antique reverence looked up as to a moral man in fellowship with angels. . . . Again, a mystic sisterhood would contumaciously assert itself as she met the sanctified frown of some matron, who, according to the rumor of all tongues, had kept cold snow within her bosom throughout life. That unsunned snow in the matron's bosom, and the burning shame on Hester Prynne's—what had the two in common? Or, once more, the electric thrill would give her warning—"Behold, Hester, here is a companion!"—and, looking up, she would detect the eyes of a young maiden glancing at the scarlet letter, shyly and aside, and quickly averted, with a faint, chill crimson in her cheeks as if her purity were somewhat sullied by that momentary glance. (90)

The scarlet letter, in addition, has many implied meanings. "A" stands for Arthur Dimmesdale, for Hester's art, for Chillingworth's black or magical art. "A" can stand for atonement, which is what Hester is trying to do—atone for her sin with charitable acts. It also represents avenger or avenge, which is the whole purpose of Chillingworth's life. "A" represents the authority of the community that hypocritically condemns Hester for the rest of her life. It stands for Dimmesdale's ambition, as well as his anguish and agony. "A" represents the community, which is frequently characterized as aged or ancient.

PEARL

Much of the meaning of the scarlet letter resides in Pearl because she is the result of Hester's adultery. Hester dresses the child in scarlet, presenting her as a little scarlet letter. Moreover, Pearl has a morbid obsession with the scarlet letter. The connection is first made in the chapter entitled "The Governor's Hall," where her red dress is described:

But it was a remarkable attribute of this garb, and, indeed, of the child's whole appearance, that it irresistibly and inevitably reminded the beholder of the token which Hester Prynne was doomed to wear upon her bosom. It was the scarlet letter in another form; the scarlet letter endowed with life! (103)

Pearl's obsession with the letter her mother wears on her breast begins in infancy as her eyes focus on it. Then as a tiny girl, Pearl evinces a fascination with the letter and continually touches it and throws wild flowers at it:

In the afternoon of a certain summer's day, after Pearl grew big enough to run about, she amused herself with gathering handfuls of wild-flowers and flinging them, one by one, at her mother's bosom, dancing up and down like a little elf whenever she hit the scarlet letter. (98, 99)

Later, she begins to pester her mother with questions about why she wears the letter and what it means. In the forest scene when Hester takes off the scarlet letter, Pearl becomes frantically disturbed and won't quiet down until Hester has it back on her dress, as if by discarding the letter Hester has discarded Pearl. Pearl even makes herself an "A" from green seaweed:

As the last touch to her mermaid's garb, Pearl took some eelgrass, and imitated, as best she could, on her own bosom, the decoration with which she was so familiar on her mother's. A letter—the letter "A"—but freshly green, instead of scarlet! (171)

How does Pearl's connection with the scarlet letter bring us closer to its meanings? If she is identified with the scarlet letter, then the reader needs to consider her characteristics to determine some of the letter's meaning. First of all, Pearl is uncontrollable, subject to hyperactivity, bad temper, even behavior that could be classified as cruel. But for all her childish cruelty and hyperactivity, she is always depicted as nature's child. While the other children in the community play games taught by society and their parents, such as scourging Quakers and having prayer meetings, Pearl plays in the forest and by the seashore with living flora and fauna. The letter "A" she makes for herself is not red, but green—nature's color. These observations lead to the conclusion that the "A," rather than being exotic and lurid, as the community sees it, is in fact natural, and that those things associated with it—passion and sexuality in particular—are natural to human nature, not scarlet