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THE SCARLET LETTER

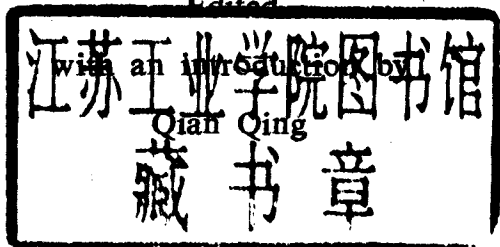
Nathaniel Hawthorne



The Scarlet Letter

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Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804—1864) was born in Salem, Massachusetts, his ancestral home, where he spent many years of his youth. His earliest American progenitor had been a judge there and had persecuted the Quakers. The man's son had achieved even greater notoriety when he sentenced a number of innocent people to death as one of the judges at the Salem witchcraft trials in 1692. The deeds of his Puritan forbears seem to have left an indelible impression on Hawthorne for he repeatedly turned to the history of New England for inspiration in his fiction, particularly to that of Salem. There is no evidence that he was influenced by Puritan religious views but he was undoubtedly both fascinated and repelled by the Puritan mind and its moral and psychological concerns. Hence the preoccupation in his fiction with such themes as original sin, the effects of sin and guilt on the sinners themselves or on their posterity, and the conflict between the 'head', (representing cold intellect) and the 'heart', (human affections).

Two of these themes — guilt and its consequences, and the conflict between the head and the heart — are embodied in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), his best-known work. The story is set in seventeenth-century Boston.

In the Custom-House introductory, Hawthorne, who worked there from 1846-1849, pretends to have found an embroidered 'A' together with documents testifying to one Hester Prynne's sin of adultery in the seventeenth century. This leads into the story proper, supposedly reconstructed from the evidence he found.

Hester is married but for unknown reasons at the time, her husband has not joined her in the colony. She falls in love with Dimmesdale, her Puritan minister, which results in adultery. Unable to hide her sin after she becomes pregnant, she confesses, refusing to disclose, however, the name of the child's father. The story opens when Hester first appears outside the local prison wearing a scarlet 'A' on her breast, the mark of her shame. Ostracized by the community, she nevertheless bears her punishment courageously, expiating her sin by performing good deeds so that the community gradually alters its attitude to her.

Dimmesdale, on the other hand, dares not confess. Though weighed down by the secret knowledge of his guilt and hypocrisy, he is fearful of the consequences of confession, which would be much more severe for him. As for the wronged husband, Chillingworth, his pride is deeply wounded. He is determined to leave no stone unturned to seek out the adulterer and destroy his peace of mind. Thus the story pivots not on adultery but on its psychological consequences.

However, to summarize the characters in such cursory fashion is to deny their rich complexity and the ambivalence of their portrayal. For instance, while it is true that Hester Prynne has confessed her sin of adultery and is doing penance for it, it is equally true that she has not repented. What others mistake for her repentance—her uncomplaining submis-

sion when scorned and derided by the crowd or when publicly castigated and made the text of a discourse, and her compassion for the poor and the sick, which gradually wins for her the approval of the townspeople—is mere outward penance, which serves to hide the bitterness and wild speculation in her heart. As the omniscient narrator points out, “The scarlet letter had not done its office.” On the contrary, the painful reminder only rouses hatred and rebellion in her sensitive and passionate nature. Unable to reveal her feelings, Hester has to bury them in her heart.

Yet Hawthorne does not regard her as a hypocrite. Her unconventional thoughts are seen as the results of her ostracism. Standing alone in society her life has turned from passion and feeling to thought. He even suggests that had it not been for Pearl’s restraining influence, she might not have stopped at subversive thought. He denounces the rigid society that forces people to hide their true feelings and adopt double standards. He even sympathizes with Hester, whose selfless love does not deserve such severe punishment, but he does not condone her adultery. Though their love is sincere, Dimmesdale and Hester have violated the Ten Commandments and must pay for it. Hester has already been punished for her passion; Dimmesdale, too, must be punished before his sins, which are greater than Hester’s, can be absolved.

Another theme which is woven into the tale is the conflict between the head and the heart. This is a common theme with Hawthorne, who distrusts cold intellect that has been separated from human emotions, especially when it attempts to peer into the privacy of the human heart. The lovers, Hester and Dimmesdale, are portrayed with sympathy and compassion for while they

have sinned, their misguided conduct is caused by natural feelings of love. For Hawthorne, Chillingworth's sin is much greater because it is prompted by his self-righteousness and cold, prying curiosity. As Dimmesdale cries to Hester: "We are not the worst sinners in the world. There is one worse than even the polluted priest! That old man's revenge has been blacker than my sin. He has violated in cold blood, the sanctity of a human heart. Thou and I, Hester, never did so!" And Hester replies fervently: "Never, never! What we did had a consecration of its own"

The structure of *The Scarlet Letter* also deserves attention. The three scaffold scenes, each with Hester, Dimmesdale and their illegitimate child, Pearl, on the scaffold, while Chillingworth stands below, form a framework for the story and appear at crucial points in the plot to drive the action forward. The first scaffold scene occurs at the beginning of the story when Hester is forced to stand on the scaffold with her baby as a punishment to herself and a warning to others. She refuses to reveal her lover's name when publicly questioned by the minister, enabling him to continue to conceal his guilt. It is also when she is there that her newly-arrived husband catches sight of her, learns what she has done, and vows revenge on the man who has cuckolded him. This paves the way for his fiendish torment of the priest.

The second scaffold scene appears exactly in the middle of the book when Hester and Pearl accidentally come across Dimmesdale a number of years later doing penance on the scaffold. Hester is shocked by his emaciated condition, realizing the cause. She seeks out Chillingworth, begs him to stop his persecution, but to no avail. Forced into action to save the man she still

loves, she waylays him in the forest to reveal the identity of his tormentor. She then persuades him to escape from his misery by fleeing to Europe with her. Later, Dimmesdale believes he has sold himself to the Devil and after much anguish, finally ascends the scaffold at the end of the book and confesses his guilt publicly just before he dies.

The Scarlet Letter is outstanding for Hawthorne's use of symbols, which adds significance and complexity to the theme. He leads us to ponder over the significance of the wild rose bush beside the prison door, of the forest beyond the town and over the meaning of the letter 'A' on Hester's breast that is initially identified with 'Adulteress' by the community but that later comes to represent 'Able' to them, and to have the effect of the cross on a nun's breast, something quite contrary to the judges' intention when they compelled Hester to wear it. As the living embodiment of the scarlet letter, Hester's daughter, Pearl, has a symbolic function as well. She is the evidence and constant reminder of her mother's sin, as well as the emblem of her love. She brings both happiness and torture to her mother, and is both her blessing and retribution. Other objects endowed with symbolic meaning (such as names, places, even to some extent, the major characters themselves) abound in the work, so much so that it has been regarded by some critics as allegorical.

The economy of the scenes, steady focus on the three main characters, insightful psychological analysis, complexity and ambiguity, dark, gloomy atmosphere as well as brilliant structure and skilful use of symbols, all combine to make *The Scarlet Letter* Hawthorne's masterpiece, and a rewarding work to read even today, over

a hundred and forty years after its publication.

Qian Qing (钱青)

Contents

Introduction

Preface to the Second Edition of <i>The Scarlet Letter</i>	1
The Custom House, Introductory to <i>The Scarlet Letter</i>	3
1. The Prison Door	1
2. The Market Place	3
3. The Recognition	14
4. The Interview	25
5. Hester at Her Needle	33
6. Pearl	44
7. The Governor's Hall	56
8. The Elf-Child and the Minister	64
9. The Leech	75
10. The Leech and His Patient	87
11. The Interior of a Heart	98
12. The Minister's Vigil	106
13. Another View of Hester	119
14. Hester and the Physician	128
15. Hester and Pearl	136
16. A Forest Walk	143
17. The Pastor and His Parishioner	151
18. A Flood of Sunshine	162
19. The Child at the Brookside	169
20. The Minister in a Maze	177
21. The New England Holiday	189
22. The Procession	200
23. The Revelation of the Scarlet Letter	212
24. Conclusion	222

1. The Prison Door

A throng of bearded men, in sad-colored garments and gray, steeple-crowned hats, intermixed with women, some wearing hoods, and others bareheaded, was assembled in front of a wooden edifice, the door of which was heavily timbered with oak and studded with iron spikes.

The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison. In accordance with this rule, it may safely be assumed that the forefathers of Boston had built the first prison house somewhere in the vicinity of Cornhill almost as seasonably as they marked out the first burial ground, on Isaac Johnson's lot and round about his grave, which subsequently became the nucleus of all the congregated sepulchres in the old churchyard of King's Chapel. Certain it is, that, some fifteen or twenty years after the settlement of the town, the wooden jail was already marked with weather-stains and other indications of age which gave a yet darker aspect to its beetle-browed and gloomy front. The rust on the ponderous iron-work of its oaken door looked more

antique than anything else in the New World. Like all that pertains to crime, it seemed never to have known a youthful era. Before this ugly edifice, and between it and the wheel-track of the street, was a grass plot, much overgrown with burdock, pigweed, apple peru, and such unsightly vegetation, which evidently found something congenial in the soil that had so early borne the black flower of civilized society, a prison. But on one side of the portal, and rooted almost at the threshold, was a wild rosebush, covered, in this month of June, with its delicate gems, which might be imagined to offer their fragrance and fragile beauty to the prisoner as he went in, and to the condemned criminal as he came forth to his doom, in token that the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to him.

This rosebush, 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 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.

2. *The Market Place*

The grass plot before the jail, in Prison Lane, on a certain summer morning not less than two centuries ago, was occupied by a pretty large number of the inhabitants of Boston, all with their eyes intently fastened on the iron-clamped oaken door. Amongst any other population, or at a later period in the history of New England, the grim rigidity that petrified the bearded physiognomies of these good people would have augured some awful business in hand. It could have betokened nothing short of the anticipated execution of some noted culprit, on whom the sentence of a legal tribunal had but confirmed the verdict of public sentiment. But in that early severity of the Puritan character, an inference of this kind could not so indubitably be drawn. It might be that a sluggish bond-servant, or an undutiful child, whom his parents had given over to the civil authority, was to be corrected at the whipping-post. It might be that an Antinomian, a Quaker, or other heterodox religionist, was to be scourged out of the town, or an idle and vagrant Indian, whom the white man's firewater had made riotous about the streets, was to be driven with stripes into the shadow of the forest. It might be, too, that a witch, like old Mistress Hibbins, the bitter-tempered widow of the magistrate, was to die upon the gallows. In either case, there was very much the same solemnity of demeanor on the part

of the spectators; as befitted a people amongst whom religion and law were almost identical, and in whose character both were so thoroughly interfused, that the mildest and the severest acts of public discipline were alike made venerable and awful. Meagre, indeed, and cold, was the sympathy that a transgressor might look for, from such bystanders at the scaffold. On the other hand, a penalty which in our days would infer a degree of mocking infamy and ridicule might then be invested with almost as stern a dignity as of death itself.

It was a circumstance to be noted, on the summer morning when our story begins its course, that the women, of whom there were several in the crowd, appeared to take a peculiar interest in whatever penal infliction might be expected to ensue. The age had not so much refinement that any sense of impropriety restrained the wearers of petticoat and farthingale from stepping forth into the public ways and wedging their not unsubstantial persons, if occasion were, into the throng nearest to the scaffold at an execution. Morally, as well as materially, there was a coarser fibre in those wives and maidens of old English birth and breeding than in their fair descendants, separated from them by a series of six or seven generations; for, throughout that chain of ancestry, every successive mother has transmitted to her child a fainter bloom, a more delicate and briefer beauty, and a slighter physical frame, if not a character of less force and solidity, than her own. The women who were now standing about the prison door stood within less than half a century of the period when the manlike Elizabeth had been the not altogether unsuitable representative of the sex. They were her countrywomen; and the beef and ale of their native land, with a moral diet not a whit more refined,

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entered largely into their composition. The bright morning sun, therefore, shone on broad shoulders and well-developed busts and on round and ruddy cheeks that had ripened in the far-off island, and had hardly yet grown paler or thinner in the atmosphere of New England. There was, moreover, a boldness and rotundity of speech among these matrons, as most of them seemed to be, that would startle us at the present day, whether in respect to its purport or its volume of tone.

"Goodwives," said a hard-featured dame of fifty, "I'll tell ye a piece of my mind. It would be greatly for the public behoof, if we women, being of mature age and church members in good repute, should have the handling of such malefactresses as this Hester Prynne. What think ye, gossips? If the hussy stood up for judgment before us five, that are now here in a knot together, would she come off with such a sentence as the worshipful magistrates have awarded? Marry, I trow not!"

"People say," said another, "that the Reverend Master Dimmesdale, her godly pastor, takes it very grievously to heart that such a scandal should have come upon his congregation."

"The magistrates are God-fearing gentlemen, but merciful overmuch — that is a truth," added a third autumnal matron. "At the very least, they should have put the brand of a hot iron on Hester Prynne's forehead. Madam Hester would have winced at that, I warrant me. But she — the naughty baggage — little will she care what they put upon the bodice of her gown! Why, look you, she may cover it with a brooch, or suchlike heathenish adornment, and so walk the streets as brave as ever!"

"Ah, but," interposed, more softly, a young wife, holding a child by the hand, "let her cover the mark as she will, the pang of it will be always in her heart."

"What do we talk of marks and brands, whether on the bodice of her gown, or the flesh of her forehead?" cried another female, the ugliest as well as the most pitiless of these self-constituted judges. "This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die. Is there no law for it? Truly there is, both in the Scripture and the statute-book. Then let the magistrates, who have made it of no effect, thank themselves if their own wives and daughters go astray!"

"Mercy on us, goodwife," exclaimed a man in the crowd, "is there no virtue in woman, save what springs from a wholesome fear of gallows? That is the hardest word yet! Hush, now, gossips! for the lock is turning in the prison door, and here comes Mistress Prynne herself."

The door of the jail being flung open from within, there appeared, in the first place, like a black shadow emerging into sunshine, the grim and grisly presence of the town beadle, with a sword by his side and his staff of office in his hand. This personage prefigured and represented in his aspect the whole dismal severity of the Puritanic code of law, which it was his business to administer in its final and closest application to the offender. Stretching forth the official staff in his left hand, he laid his right upon the shoulder of a young woman, whom he thus drew forward; until, on the threshold of the prison door, she repelled him, by an action marked with natural dignity and force of character, and stepped into the open air, as if by her own free will. She bore in her arms a child, a baby of some three months old, who winked and turned aside its

little face from the too vivid light of day; because its existence, heretofore, had brought it acquainted only with the gray twilight of a dungeon, or other darksome apartment of the prison.

When the young woman — the mother of this child — stood fully revealed before the crowd, it seemed to be her first impulse to clasp the infant closely to her bosom; not so much by an impulse of motherly affection, as that she might thereby conceal a certain token, which was wrought or fastened into her dress. In a moment, however, wisely judging that one token of her shame would but poorly serve to hide another, she took the baby on her arm, and, with a burning blush, and yet a haughty smile, and a glance that would not be abashed, looked around at her townspeople and neighbors. On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter "A." It was so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel which she wore; and which was of a splendor in accordance with the taste of the age, but greatly beyond what was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony.

The young woman was tall, with a figure of perfect elegance on a large scale. She had dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam, and a face which, besides being beautiful from regularity of feature and richness of complexion, had the impressiveness belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes. She was ladylike, too, after the manner of the feminine gentility of those days; characterized by a certain state and dignity, rather than by the delicate,