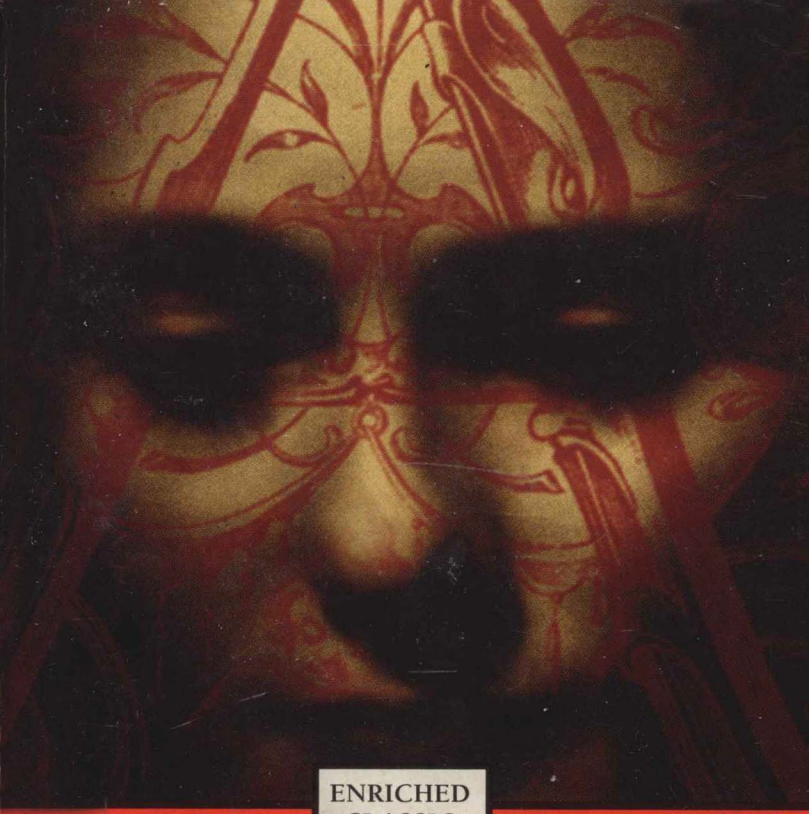

ENRICHED CLASSIC

THE SCARLET LETTER

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

Includes detailed explanatory notes, an overview of key themes, and more

THE SCARLET LETTER

Nathaniel Hawthorne

Supplementary materials written by
Margaret Brantley
Series edited by Cynthia Brantley Johnson

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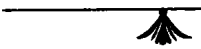
INTRODUCTION
The Scarlet Letter: The Americanization of Fiction



The Scarlet Letter was declared a classic almost immediately after its publication in 1850, and it has stayed in print and in favor ever since. It has been hailed both as the first symbolic novel and as the first psychological novel (even though it was written before there was a science called psychology). But what really secures the place of *The Scarlet Letter* in literary history is its treatment of human nature, sin, guilt, and pride—all timeless, universal themes—from a uniquely American point of view.

In the decades that followed the American Revolution, the United States struggled to distinguish itself culturally from Europe. There was a sense that if the United States were to become a great nation, it needed to have its own artistic traditions, not transplanted imitations of European models. Hawthorne rose to this challenge. *The Scarlet Letter* is set in the

mid-seventeenth century in a Puritan colony on the edge of an untamed forest still inhabited by Native Americans. The landscape is wholly American. In the book, Hawthorne manages to put his finger on several thematic elements that came to define the American national identity: the effects of strict religious morality, the long struggle against a vast frontier, the troubled relationship between white settlers and Native Americans. These issues were just as relevant in Hawthorne's day as they were in Puritan times, and the way Americans and the United States government addressed these issues shaped the development of the nation.

What is perhaps even more remarkable about this 150-year-old story is that its characters face the same moral struggles as readers in the twenty-first century. In Puritan Massachusetts, morality was strictly legislated and Church and State were one and the same. Although Church and State have been separate legally since the Bill of Rights was ratified in 1791, issues of morality, personal freedom, and public life are still hot topics of national debate. Should politicians be called to account for their personal lives? Must public figures serve as role models? Does our government have a right to make laws controlling private behavior? In Puritan colonies, sinners were often branded with a hot iron and put up on a scaffold for public mockery. We no longer use actual branding irons on the people whose moral failings we condemn. But modern media are far more effective than scaffolds for holding people up for public scrutiny, and the American public's readiness to judge the sins of others remains just as strong as it was 350 years ago. Modern readers will see much of themselves in the characters of *The Scarlet Letter.*

The Life and Work of Nathaniel Hawthorne

Captain Nathaniel Hathorne and his wife, Elizabeth Manning Hathorne, welcomed their son Nathaniel on Independence Day, 1804, in Salem, Massachusetts. When Captain Hathorne died at sea in 1808, his widow took young Nathaniel and his two sisters and moved in with her family, the Mannings. Nathaniel suffered an injury to his foot when he was nine that kept him out of school for more than a year, during which time his love of books emerged. His early teens were spent with his mother and sisters on property owned by the Mannings on the shore of Sebago Lake in Raymond, Maine.

He attended Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, where his classmates included Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the future writer, and Franklin Pierce, the future president. He graduated in 1825, and spent the next twelve years living with his mother in Salem and writing. He published his first novel, *Fanshawe: A Tale,* anonymously and at his own expense in 1828. Throughout the 1830s he published more than seventy tales and sketches, some of which would later appear in his *Twice-Told Tales,* published in 1837. When he became engaged to Sophia Peabody in 1839, he decided to find a way to earn a better living than he could at writing, so he took a position as an inspector in the Boston Custom House. He would spend the rest of his life balancing nonwriting work for financial security with his artistic drive to write.

Nathaniel and Sophia were both followers of the Transcendentalist movement that held that divinity manifests itself everywhere, particularly in nature, and that people should foster individual relationships with

the divine, rather than seek it through structured religion. They married in 1842 and moved to the Old Manse in Concord, Massachusetts, where he earned his living as a writer and they entertained the prominent thinkers of the day. Their first child, Una, was born in 1844. Seeking greater financial security, the family returned to Salem the next year. *Mosses from an Old Manse* was published in 1846, the same year he was appointed Surveyor of Customs at the Salem Custom House, thanks to his friendship with then former senator Franklin Pierce. Their second child, Julian, was also born that year.

The election of Zachary Taylor, a Whig, to the White House in 1849 led to the removal of the Democrat-appointed Hawthorne from his post at the Custom House. Shocked and disillusioned, he channeled his energy into *The Scarlet Letter*, which was published in 1850 to popular and critical acclaim. The semiautobiographical satirical essay "The Custom House" was included in the second printing as an introduction to *The Scarlet Letter* because Hawthorne felt that the book was too short and too dark on its own.

In "The Custom House," he mentions his great-great-great-grandfather William Hathorne, a Puritan who arrived in Massachusetts in 1630, and his son John. William became the Speaker of the House of Delegates in Massachusetts, and was an active participant in the persecution of Quakers, a sect whose beliefs were a threat to the Puritans. Posterity remembers John Hathorne for being a judge in the infamous Salem Witch Trials of 1692, where dozens of people were executed for or died awaiting trial for practicing witchcraft. Hawthorne was both fascinated and repulsed by his

forefathers' roles in the country's earliest days. His fascination with the period moved him to use a Puritan setting in many of his stories, such as "Young Goodman Brown" and "The Minister's Black Veil." So much of his most famous work takes place in early colonial times that many readers mistakenly assume that he was a Puritan himself.

The success that followed *The Scarlet Letter* allowed Hawthorne to focus on his writing. In a short period of two years he published *The House of the Seven Gables, The Snow Image and Other Twice-Told Tales,* "Feathertop," *The Wonder Book* (a children's book of classical myths), *The Blithedale Romance,* and a biography of Franklin Pierce, who was elected president in 1852. A third child, Rose, was also born during this time.

Following his friend's election to the presidency, Hawthorne accepted an appointment as U.S. consul in Liverpool from 1853 until 1857. The family remained in Europe until 1860, moving first to Italy, where he began work on *The Marble Faun,* and then returning to England, where he finished his last novel. He spent the last years of his life suffering from gastrointestinal cancer, and died in 1864 while on a short vacation in New Hampshire with Pierce.

Historical and Literary Context of *The Scarlet Letter*

America's Puritan Past

The earliest settlers in America were religious separatists who wanted to reform the Church of England,

feeling that its Roman Catholic roots had shifted its focus too far from true doctrine. The movement arose during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I in the late 1500s. Threatened with persecution, many reformers left England seeking greater religious freedom. They settled first in Holland and later set sail for America, which they envisioned as a new "Promised Land." The reform movement ultimately led to revolution in England and an interruption in the rule of the monarchy from 1649 until 1660.

Puritans in America established a theocracy, government by religion, where political leaders were supposed to protect the Church. Central to the Puritan belief system was the concept of "total depravity": They believed all people were born sinful because they inherited Adam's sin. Puritans also believed in predestination, the idea that everything, including whether they would achieve salvation, was predetermined. They reasoned that fate would favor those who lived according to the word of God as revealed in Scripture, but believed they had no control over God's decision to save them or condemn them. Strict adherence to God's will was central to Puritan life. Believers were supposed to live in constant awareness that they were at the mercy of a God who was inclined to be angry at them for their depravity and might at any moment cast them into hell. Any frivolity or luxury that caused one to focus on the temporal world—wearing fancy clothes or jewelry, using ornate or decorative objects in the home, dancing and listening to lively music—were considered evil distractions.

Puritans also believed in literal heaven and hell, and

that real saints and devils walked among them. To the Puritans, nature and the wilderness were dangerous, godless places where actual demons lurked to tempt them. In an ancient Christian concept called typology, events and people in the Old Testament correlate to events and people in the New Testament. Based on that concept, Puritans believed that the Bible forecasted events in their modern world, that God's intentions are present in human action and in natural phenomenon. To the Puritans, the physical world in which we exist was not the "real world." To them the "real world" was invisible and they could only get clues about the real, invisible world through signs and symbols here in the visible world. As everything was predetermined, interpreting signs of what was to come was taken seriously.

The history of the Puritan settlements is characterized by harsh frontier living conditions, attacks by Native Americans reacting against the settlers' expansion into their land, and severe punishments meted out to those judged guilty of sin. The most notorious episode in Puritan history was the Salem Witch Trials. In the late 1680s, Cotton Mather, a famous Puritan theologian, became convinced that witchcraft was responsible for some strange behavior in a family of Boston boys, and published his conclusions on witchcraft in a pamphlet called "Memorable Providences." A few years later, five judges, including three of Mather's friends and Hawthorne's great-great-grandfather, convened the Salem Witchcraft Trials after several young girls appeared to suffer hysterical fits of torment and began calling out the names of townspeople they said

were witches responsible for their pain. Between June and October 1692, fourteen women and five men were hanged after being convicted of witchcraft.

American Romanticism and Transcendentalism

The period in American literature from 1830 to 1865 is sometimes referred to as the "American Renaissance." But since those years saw the birth, not the rebirth, of the United States' literary identity, "renaissance" is really a misnomer. The time frame is better described as the Romantic Period in American Literature. In the mid-nineteenth century, there was a flood of American classics from Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Edgar Allan Poe, and Walt Whitman—all literary contemporaries.

Less than a century since the American Revolution and on the eve of the Civil War, the young nation felt destined for greatness and struggled to find the identity that would lead it to its destiny. The United States' first generation of creative minds wanted to help establish a distinctly American cultural identity to liberate their new country from Europe's cultural imperialism just as it had been liberated from political imperialism. American Romanticism is what emerged as that expression of national spirit based on native resources. A romantic movement was also under way in Europe at the time, and while both emphasized the individual and emotion, European writers favored historical and gothic topics and American writers were more nationalistic.

To the Romantics, inspiration, intuition, and imagination were seen as divine sparks that pointed to Truth.

They strove to be more emotional and less rational and to follow their instincts rather than arbitrary rules. A hallmark of American Romanticism is the rejection of the earlier strict, narrow confines of religion and aesthetics, namely Calvinism and Classicism, in favor of individual expression, be it with the divine, through creativity, or in nature. This viewpoint could not have been more different from that of the Puritans, who considered wilderness to be dangerous and full of demons.

Elements of the Romantic American identity included high regard for the individual; the western frontier, wide-open space, and freedom from geographic limits; optimism for what the frontier held; scientific experimentation and advances; the "melting pot" as immigrants arrived from all over the world; and the polarization of North and South with the rise of industrialization in the North. The subjects of the literature of the Romantic Movement focused on the quest for beauty; the faraway, the long-ago, and the lurid; escapism from contemporary problems; and nature as a source of knowledge, refuge, and divinity. To explore these subjects, Romantic writers stressed emotion and subjectivity, and often asked their readers to suspend their disbelief.

To understand the philosophical underpinnings of American Romanticism, we must look to Transcendentalism, the belief in the essential divinity of everything, people's innate goodness, and the importance of insight over logic in the quest for truth. Avenues through which to seek truth included meditation, communing with nature, good works, and art.

The Enlightenment of the previous two centuries

emphasized logic and the scientific method. Stifled by two hundred years of rationalism and discipline, truth-seekers in Europe and the United States mounted an attack on Reason and called it Romanticism. In New England, the branch that flourished was called Transcendentalism.

Ralph Waldo Emerson described the ideals in 1837, before the name for those ideals had yet been bestowed: "We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds . . . A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men."

The Transcendentalist Movement was centered in Boston and Concord, Massachusetts, the home of many of the literary members such as Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, and the Alcotts. They led such contemporary reform movements as utopian communes; women's suffrage; abolition of slavery; workers' rights; temperance; free religion; and advances in education. Hawthorne himself participated in one of the better known Transcendentalist experiments in communal living: Brook Farm, a utopian commune located just outside of Boston. The 175-acre farm only operated as a commune—a community in which all residents participated equally in the management and cultivation of the farm—between 1841 and 1847. Hawthorne spent about six months at Brook Farm, but ultimately decided he was not suited for communal living. Many of the people Hawthorne knew at Brook Farm were active in the abolitionist and women's rights movements. Margaret Fuller, for example, was a famous lecturer and prominent feminist whom Hawthorne knew

at the commune (she was the model for his character Zenobia in *The Blithedale Romance).* Horace Greeley, writer and editor, was also a women's right supporter, but he attracted national attention in the 1850s for his antislavery articles. Hawthorne's position on such issues is less clear. His approach to religion and nature was distinctly Transcendentalist, but he was more socially conservative than his Massachusetts cohorts. He did not participate directly or actively in the national political debates.

Literary Context

In understanding the context of *The Scarlet Letter,* it is also important to understand the way it was viewed by its author; as a romance, not as a novel. To consider himself a writer of romances had nothing to do with the cultural American Romantic Movement of the time. It has to do with the way the author approached his work, and the latitude he took with it.

The distinction between "novel" and "romance" is largely lost today, but in its time they referred to two different approaches to fiction. As Hawthorne states in his Introduction, "The Custom House," ". . . if a man, sitting all alone cannot dream strange things, and make them look like truth, he need never try to write romances."

Today, we consider any long work of fiction to be a novel. But in Hawthorne's day, novels were supposed to deal with realistic representations of human experiences to depict external truths, while romances were allowed to employ fantastic representations of their characters' experiences to arrive at inner truths.

A novel pays close attention to detail in creating its reality. It focuses on its characters and its audience's feelings for the characters, rather than action or plot. The events that occur in a novel tend to be plausible. On the other hand, the romance is less focused on realism than on symbols; less concerned with a story's credibility than its resonance.

C. Hugh Holman give us this definition in his *A Handbook to Literature:* "Romance is now frequently used as a term to designate a kind of fiction that differs from the novel in being more freely the product of the author's imagination than the product of an effort to represent the actual world with verisimilitude."

Chronology of Nathaniel Hawthorne's Life and Work

1804: Nathaniel Hawthorne is born on July 4 in Salem, Massachusetts.

1808: His father dies of yellow fever in Dutch Guiana, and, with his mother and two sisters, Nathaniel goes to live with his mother's family.

1821: Enters Bowdoin college in Brunswick, Maine, where his classmates include Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the future writer, and Franklin Pierce, the future president.

1828: Publishes his first novel, *Fanshawe: A Tale* anonymously and at his own expense.

1830: "Signs from a Steeple" is published in *The Token,* and "The Hollow of the Three Hills" is published in *The Salem Gazette.*

1831: Publishes the first three of more than seventy tales and sketches that would appear in *The Token* through 1839.

1836: Edits and writes for the *American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge* in Boston.

1837: *Twice-Told Tales* is published.

1839: Becomes engaged to Sophia Peabody and becomes an inspector in the Boston Custom House.

1840: Publishes *Grandfather's Chair,* a history of New England for children.

1841: Lives at the Brook Farm, a utopian Transcendentalist commune outside of Boston founded by George Ripley, from April to November.

1842: Marries Sophia Peabody and moves to the Old Manse in Concord, Massachusetts.

1844: Daughter Una is born

1845: Moves with his family back to Salem.

1846: Publishes *Mosses from an Old Manse.* Son Julian is born. Becomes Surveyor of Customs at the Salem Custom House.

1849: Is dismissed from the Custom House. Begins writing *The Scarlet Letter.*

1850: Publishes *The Scarlet Letter.*

1851: Publishes *The House of the Seven Gables, The Snow Image and Other Twice-Told Tales,* "Feathertop," and *The Wonder Book,* a children's book of classical myths. Daughter Rose is born.

1852: Publishes *The Blithedale Romance.* Publishes a biography of Franklin Pierce, who is elected president that year.

1853: Publishes *Tanglewood Tales,* another children's book of mythology. Is appointed United States consul in Liverpool, England, a post he holds for four years.