

0. HAWTHORNE and THE SCARLET LETTER - Story
Preface

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Wearing the letter "A" on her clothes, Hester Prynne must display the "scarlet letter" whenever she is in public. This artistic interpretation of Hester Prynne, which Hugues Merle created in 1861, was Hawthorne's favorite illustration of his novel. Click on the image for a better view.

Salem, a Massachusetts town which was home to the infamous witch trials of the 17th century, was also home to Nathaniel Hawthorne when he wrote *The Scarlet Letter*.

Perhaps he was influenced by the town's history when he penned his tale of Puritan pride and punishment. Or maybe he wrote the story to examine the skeletons of his own past, his great-great-grandfather (John Hathorne) having been one of three Salem judges who determined people were witches and condemned them to death.

One can imagine Hawthorne (who once worked at Salem's Custom House) wanting to believe his ancestor experienced inner turmoil when his personal sense of human justice was confronted with strict Puritan standards. Nathaniel (be sure to click on "Hawthorne Interactive") explored such concepts through his characters - Rev. Dimmesdale, for example.

Caught between his own conscience, the standards of his community, the blind devotion given him by the townspeople, the dark presence of Hester Prynne's husband (Roger Chillingworth) and his desire to help Hester (the mother of his illegitimate child), Dimmesdale faces a serious moral dilemma. Perhaps the novel's resolution of that conflict was Hawthorne's attempt to ameliorate the actions of his Puritan relative.

Not all contemporary reviews of the book were glowing. Thirty-six years after its publication, *The Atlantic Monthly* featured an article entitled "Problems of the Scarlet Letter." In the April, 1886 edition (at page 473), the author observes:

It is with the subjective consequences of a sinners act that our understanding of him begins. The murderers blow tells us nothing of his character; but in his remorse or exultation over his deed his secret is revealed to us.

So Hawthorne fixes the starting-point of his romance at Hester's prison-door, rather than at any earlier epoch of her career, because the narrative can thence, as it were, move both ways at once; all essentials of the past can be gathered up as wanted, and the reminiscences and self-knowledge of the characters can supplement the authors analysis...But the personages of this tale are not technically developed; they are gradually made transparent as they stand, until we see them through and through.

And what we thus behold is less individual peculiarities than traits and devices of our general human nature, under the stress of the given conditions.

Addressing spiritual and moral issues, The Scarlet Letter was America's first psychological novel. Adultery, in 1850, was a risqué subject for any book, let alone a "romantic" story. But with the New England literary establishment behind him, Hawthorne succeeded.

Exploring universal themes, the book remains a classic. In fact, one could draw parallels between that age and this. Religious fundamentalism characterized, and sometimes terrorized, Puritan society. Religious fundamentalism characterizes today's terrorists.

Modern readers might quibble with Hawthorne's English, but it's hard to ignore the relevance of his message.

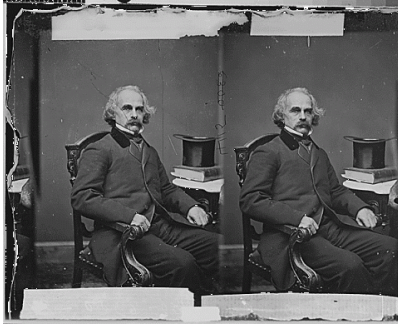
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Media Stream



Nathaniel Hawthorne - Portrait, Later Life

Image online, courtesy the U.S. Library of Congress.

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Scarlet Letter - Hester Prynne and Child

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