

Title: Overview: *The Scarlet Letter*

Novel, 1850

American Writer (1804 - 1864)

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In “The Custom-House,” the introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne fabricates a story in which he explains that he stumbled upon a worn piece of red cloth in the shape of an A while working in Salem's Custom-House, where taxes were collected on imported goods. Accompanying the cloth, he continues, was an old manuscript about a certain Hester Prynne, who, two centuries earlier, had been forced to wear the now-faded A in public as punishment for committing the sin of adultery. While in reality Hawthorne found no such document, his novel was influenced by historical manuscripts about Puritan New England and his own ancestors. Hawthorne's family history harked back to the Massachusetts of the 1600s, where Puritan justice could reasonably have passed down such a punishment for adultery.

Events in History at the Time the Novel Takes Place

The Puritans in Massachusetts

In 1630 a wave of Puritans arrived in New England to populate the Massachusetts Bay Colony founded by John Winthrop. These Puritans came to Massachusetts in an effort to avoid the corruption that they thought had been plaguing the Church of England. Yet despite their objections to what was happening in the English church, they did not come to New England simply to escape that state of affairs but rather, as devoted reformers, to provide England with evidence of a model religious society. In order to ensure the success of their mission, the Puritans employed a rigid system of discipline that relied heavily on its citizens' reporting on the individual transgressions of one another.

Challenges of the New Society

As Puritans began settling in the Boston colony in the 1630s, they faced a multitude of challenges, one of the greatest being the difficulty of taming the terrain in which they now lived. Surrounded by marshlands, the area was not easily arable; consequently, families were allotted very small parcels of land on which to grow crops. Another problem was a severe lack of wood, which made the biting cold of winter a life-threatening danger; the early history of the Boston colony is fraught with stories of Puritans freezing to death and losing fingers and toes to the frost of harsh winters. In addition, the settlers found little feed for their cattle, which also jeopardized their food supply. These problems diminished as settlers expanded inland to areas where wood and grazing land were more abundant.

Furthermore, during much of the 1630s, the settlers lived in almost constant fear of attack by Indians. Two tribes, the Narragansetts and the Pequots, lived in the territory surrounding Boston. Fortunately for the Puritans, the two tribes were constantly at war with each other. Capitalizing on this warfare, the Puritans joined forces with the Narragansetts and another tribe, the Mohegans, to make war on the Pequots in 1637. Approximately 700 Pequot men, women, and children were massacred, and 180 survivors were absorbed by other Indian tribes. The steady arrival of fresh colonists and the decimation of the Indian tribes by smallpox further reduced the threat of Indian violence. As they gradually gained some control over their environment, the leaders of the new Puritan colony established rules to govern their populace.

Government and Crime

The founders of Massachusetts Bay Colony attempted to base their new government strictly on the Bible. They set up a system of rule by a governor, a deputy governor, and several assistants, who were collectively known as the

“magistrates.” These officials were able to make whatever decisions they wanted, for during their first decade of power, no written criminal code existed to limit their authority. By 1635 colonists had grown so alarmed at the unrestrained power of the magistrates that they demanded a code of written laws. This code, which was finally adopted in 1641, became known as the Body of Liberties, and it included some one hundred civil and criminal laws. Every offense listed was connected to the Bible with references to book, chapter, and verse. Accepting this code, the colony would operate by it for most of the period until 1692.

Anne Hutchinson's Heresies

In 1636 Anne Hutchinson and a group of other colonists later known as “Antinomians” (from the Greek words *anti-*, meaning “against,” and *nomos*, meaning “law”) began to disturb the strict order of the Massachusetts Bay colony by protesting in meetings that the performance of good works, or, to put it in another way, the observance of religious laws, was not a reliable sign of godliness. Hutchinson and her fellow Antinomians believed that true godliness came from a person's inner acquaintance with the Holy Spirit; one's salvation could not be deduced simply from an outward show of good works. Hutchinson also came to believe that a person who had experienced this inner certainty of salvation could communicate directly with God and that she herself had divine revelations. Further angering leaders of the colony, she hinted that the only two ministers worth listening to were her brother-in-law, John Wheelwright, and a clergyman named John Cotton, whose religious ideas had inspired her own, even before she had loyally followed him across the Atlantic from England. In 1638, Hutchinson underwent two trials, the first of which resulted in her excommunication, and the second in her banishment from Massachusetts.

The heroine of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne, also confronts and resists the authority of the magistrates; and although her crime and her punishment differ from those of Anne Hutchinson, Hawthorne twice refers to the famous Antinomian in descriptions of Hester, implying a parallel between his fictional rebel and the historical one. Not only were both women publicly punished, but both refused to confess their association with prominent ministers who, for their part, actually found themselves sitting as judges for “crimes” in which they themselves had been involved. For Hutchinson, the partner was John Cotton, the minister whose teachings had in no small way inspired her own religious beliefs. For Prynne, of course, the partner is the reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, her lover and the unacknowledged father of her daughter Pearl. Hutchinson's story unfolded from 1636 to 1638, while Hester's occurs only a few years later, from 1642 to 1649.

Commenting on the Prynne-Hutchinson comparison, one literary historian has observed that Puritan accounts of Anne Hutchinson's defiance, including several sources Hawthorne was familiar with, repeatedly described Hutchinson's heretical interpretations of religious doctrine in sexual terms. Her beliefs were regarded as illegitimate, “bastard” products of some unidentified male influence, and Hutchinson was even supposed to have given birth to real “monstrous” offspring in the aftermath of her trial (Colacurcio in Hawthorne, p. 224–25). In this light, Hester Prynne's hidden relationship with Dimmesdale and the birth of Pearl, a child whom many of Hester's neighbors think of as “demon offspring,” suggest Hawthorne's awareness of how significant—and how threatening—Hutchinson's sexuality was in the eyes of the Puritans who condemned her. They associated it with her ability to bear monstrous ideas.

The Novel in Focus

The Plot

The novel opens as Hester Prynne is standing on a public scaffold in front of the townspeople of Boston. A convicted adulteress, she must stay there for three hours, clutching the baby that her illicit love affair produced and facing the scorn of the Puritan community. Hester has also been sentenced to wear a scarlet A on the front of her dress as a constant reminder of her crime of adultery.

While staring at the crowd from the scaffold, Hester spots her long-lost husband, a doctor who sent her to Boston two years earlier while he stayed behind in Amsterdam. It was assumed that he had been killed in a shipwreck. Having just arrived, he learns why Hester is on the scaffold and vows to discover the identity of the man who has been her lover.

Hester is questioned by the ministers John Wilson and Arthur Dimmesdale, who implore her to reveal the name of her child's father, but she refuses. Returning to her cell, Hester and her baby are extremely agitated, and the jailer sends for a doctor. The doctor turns out to be Hester's husband, Roger Chillingworth. Providing medicine for Hester and her baby,

Chillingworth takes partial blame for her predicament. He admits that, because of his age and physical deformities, he was wrong to have married Hester in the first place. Hester confesses that she has wronged him but nevertheless refuses to give Chillingworth her lover's name. She does agree, however, to his request that she conceal the fact that he is her husband.

After her release from prison, Hester moves to a small house on the edge of town, where she lives alone with her daughter, Pearl. As Pearl grows older, her behavior strikes the townspeople and, at times, Hester herself, as strange and unnatural; Pearl is a wild-eyed, impetuous child whose face sometimes takes on an impish, knowing cast that disturbs those around her. But when the townspeople try to have Pearl removed from Hester's care, the anxious mother visits Governor Bellingham's home, hoping to enlist his help. During the visit, Pearl comes into contact with the reverend Arthur Dimmesdale—her father, though she has never been told this. The usually hard-hearted child is tenderly attracted to Dimmesdale, a fact that does not go unnoticed by Roger Chillingworth, who has been acting as Dimmesdale's personal physician.

One night Dimmesdale returns to the scaffold where, years earlier, Hester and Pearl had stood alone. Plagued with guilt, he mounts the stand; Hester and Pearl join him there. Pearl asks that he stand with them again tomorrow in public view, but he refuses. The tension mounts when the three realize that they are being watched by Chillingworth, whose suspicions about Dimmesdale are rapidly being confirmed.

Concerned about Dimmesdale's declining health, and suspicious of what is slowly draining him, Hester plans to reveal to him that Chillingworth, Dimmesdale's physician, is, in fact, her husband. One day she tells Chillingworth that she must reveal his identity to Dimmesdale, and begs him to forgive the man. Chillingworth counters by saying that a higher power than himself is controlling his actions.

Convinced now that Chillingworth will prove to be the end of Dimmesdale, Hester intercepts her lover in the forest and reveals to him that Chillingworth is her husband. She further declares that her husband is intent on ruining Dimmesdale and urges him to escape the doctor's evil eye. Imploring him to go elsewhere to seek a new life, she promises “Thou shalt not go alone!” (*Scarlet Letter*, p. 216).

Excited by thoughts of escaping to Europe with Hester and Pearl, Dimmesdale returns to town light of heart and full of reckless impulses. He is tempted to utter blasphemy and, in one instance, to speak obscenely to a young girl. Frightened by this sudden change in himself, he runs into Mistress Hibbins, who has long been suspected of being a witch. Mockingly, she questions him about his trip through the forest and laughs when he attempts to deny any wrongdoing. Returning to his room, he fears that he may have sold his soul to the devil. Dimmesdale burns the sermon that he had intended to give during the ceremonies marking the election of a new governor and, instead, stays up all night to draft another.

During the Election Day celebration, Hester is horrified to learn that Chillingworth has booked passage on the same ship she was planning to take to Europe with Dimmesdale and Pearl. As she laments this turn of events, she warns Pearl not to expect Dimmesdale to acknowledge their presence in public; throughout the novel, there is the suggestion that Pearl knows who her father is, but Hawthorne leaves it ambiguous at this point. Hester warns her daughter only that their friend the minister might not want to recognize them. But after delivering a brilliant sermon, Dimmesdale stumbles out of the church with the procession. He stops at the scaffolding, where he summons Hester and Pearl to join him. Chillingworth follows, a party to the sin because of the emotional torment he has visited on Dimmesdale. Ascending the scaffold, Dimmesdale escapes Chillingworth's evil clutches by admitting to the crowd that he is Pearl's father. Declaring that everyone should now witness the symbol of his sin, he exposes his bare chest to reveal—as witnesses later insist—a scarlet A “imprinted in the flesh” (*The Scarlet Letter*, p. 174) Following this revelation, Dimmesdale collapses and dies in Hester's arms, but not before he has received a kiss from his daughter. Hester and Pearl leave for parts unknown. Years later, Hester returns alone to her old abode on the edge of town and voluntarily begins to wear the old letter A once again.

Sin and Guilt in The Scarlet Letter

Sparked by Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale's adulterous affair, the plot of the novel focuses on sin in Puritan society. Hester's sin is easily visible and identifiable by her Puritan community—the existence of the child Pearl is ample evidence of her transgression.

Hester suffers the ridicule of the Puritan community, clutching her newborn baby to her breast in an effort to hide the A. Unlike her lover, however, she has an ability to come to terms with her sin. This strength allows her, even at this stage, to admit the futility of trying to hide one symbol of her sin—the A—with another, the baby.

Hester's public punishment reflects an actual practice of the time. The prevalent theory of the period held that punishing lawbreakers in public would shame them and discourage them from committing future misdeeds. Public punishments included branding—placing a mark on the lawbreaker's hand or cheek or a bright letter on his or her clothing that served as a symbol of the crime committed, like Hester's A. As early as 1634 a Boston drunkard was sentenced to wear a red *D* on his neck for a year.

Enduring public scorn, Hester becomes the only “sinner” in the book who manages to remain unrepentant; she retains her dignity despite the public punishment designed to shame her. Unlike the guilt-ridden Dimmesdale, she remains calm about having bucked the rules of society, a fact that may reflect a belief on Hawthorne's part that women, contrary to sexist stereotypes, were more prone than men to rebel against the conventions of society. Such stereotypes may explain the ironic fact that the Puritan community ultimately fails to recognize her unrepentant attitude; they, not Hester, eventually begin ascribing new meanings like “Able” to the scarlet badge that was meant to brand Hester as an adulteress.

Arthur Dimmesdale, the partner in Hester's sin, is a minister, one of the select individuals who in Puritan society goes about daily performing good works that are evidence of his being saved. Where, then, does committing this sin leave him? As one authority points out, Dimmesdale is a victim of his own beliefs, a Puritan “consumed by fear that ... he did once and does still love Hester more than God, preferring the creature to the creator” (Colacurcio, pp. 118–19). For Dimmesdale, no amount of self-punishment or devoted prayer can ease the emotional turmoil that results. He tries to rationalize the matter, arguing that some men do not openly confess their sins so that they may continue to promote God's glory on earth. While this smacks of the hypocrite who advises others to “do as I say, not as I do,” it also brings to mind a real viewpoint held in the Puritan communities of New England; true believers fully expected to receive some hypocrites into their churches. Though they sought diligently to detect and discourage hypocrisy, they accepted the possibility of failure because, in outward practice, the hypocrite was often a more enthusiastic Puritan and so set a more striking example than the true saint.

Sources

While there has been much speculation as to Nathaniel Hawthorne's original inspiration for *The Scarlet Letter*, there is no doubt that in one way or another he was heavily influenced by his own Puritan background. Hawthorne's family was one of the oldest in Massachusetts; his great-great-grandfather, William Hawthorne, was one of the presiding judges at the Salem witch trials, responsible for the infamous executions of several women. This blight on his family history weighed heavily on Hawthorne—enough so to have affected his depiction of the judgment that takes place in *The Scarlet Letter* and, more generally, his concern with sin and guilt in the novel.

An interesting historical detail about Hawthorne's family history provides another link between the author's ancestry and *The Scarlet Letter*. County records dating from 1681 reveal that two of Hawthorne's relatives on his mother's side were convicted of incest with their brother. The two were given a public whipping and made to stand in public with a band around their foreheads that revealed the nature of their crime for all to see. Meanwhile, their brother and partner in crime, Captain Nicholas Manning, hid in the forest. While scholars have debated as to whether or not Hawthorne knew of this dark moment, the similarities between this episode and Hester's predicament can hardly be dismissed.

Hawthorne immersed himself in a collection of firsthand sources about Puritan New England, including John Winthrop's *Journal*, Thomas Hutchinson's *History of Massachusetts Bay*, and Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*. His novel features actual historical personalities such as Mistress Ann Hibbins, who was hanged for witchcraft on June 19, 1656, seven years after the action in the novel concludes. Given all his research, it seems unlikely that Hawthorne was simply mistaken in his identification of the governor in his novel as Bellingham, who was actually voted out of office in the spring of 1642. Rather, a deliberate, artistic purpose may have prompted this rearrangement of history: Bellingham was voted out of office for taking part in a sexual relationship that offended his real Puritan community, much like Hester's affair offended the fictional Puritan village in which she resided. The fifty-year-old Bellingham, a widower, wanted to remarry a girl of twenty, and on his own authority as governor simply declared himself wed to her. An attempt to put him on trial for this offense proved unsuccessful.

Events in History at the Time the Novel Was Written

Upheavals of the 1840s

In 1848 Zachary Taylor won the presidency of the United States, a development that would oust Hawthorne from his post as supervisor at the Salem Customs-House. The author took this dismissal hard. By the time he was turned out of office on June 8, 1849, he felt a fury that would spill over into his introductory essay, “The Customs-House,” which compares his own political party, the Democrats, to the one that ousted him, the Whigs. Democrats, he contended, knew how to spare opponent party members in office after an election, and when they did strike, their axe was seldom poisoned with the ill-will that he experienced.

Speaking figuratively of Democrats being guillotined out of public office by the triumphant Whigs, “The Customs House” alludes ironically to the tumultuous revolutions that had broken out all over Europe in 1848—in France, Austria, Germany, Belgium, Poland, Bohemia, Ireland, Italy, and Hungary. Like many others in America, Hawthorne recoiled at the European revolutions of 1848–49. Most of Boston, according to the historian George Bancroft, a contemporary of Hawthorne's, was “frightened out of its wits” (Bancroft in Bercovitch, p. 76). At first, Americans had welcomed the revolutions as a hopeful sign that the principles of popular and national sovereignty were overcoming dynastic rule and imperialism in the Old World; but as leadership failed in one country after another, they began to fear that the chaos and destruction enveloping Europe would spread to the United States.

In the eyes of some, America's social fabric faced another threat along with (or worse, in combination with) the spectre of European revolt: 1848 also saw America's first women's rights convention at Seneca Falls, New York. The conventioners passed a Declaration of Sentiments that listed sixteen forms of discrimination against women in American society, stressing mostly the lack of property and voting rights. According to one conservative argument of the day, feminist activism and European radicalism both aimed “to emancipate woman by making her independent of man, thus giving her up to follow her passions and making a rule of adultery” (Bercovitch, p. 78). For those who subscribed to such arguments, proper moral conduct and even American democracy itself depended on women's remaining in their God-ordained places—the home and family. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester's thoughts imply something similar, when she reflects that the whole social system would have to be torn down and built anew before women could assume a fair position in it.

Transcendentalism

One of the dominant American philosophical and social movements of the nineteenth century, transcendentalism was centered in the region of New England in which Hawthorne lived. Based on an idealistic philosophy promoted by writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller, this movement emphasized notions of the unity shared by all creatures, the innate goodness of human beings, and the importance of personal insight. The transcendentalists believed in social reform, but felt that it must begin first with the individual. Members of the movement rejected the standard religious practices of the day and promoted freedom of thought or, as Emerson famously called it, “self reliance.” For this dependence on inward illumination, traditional Congregationalists—the religious inheritors of the early New England Puritans—sometimes criticized transcendentalism as a movement that recalled Anne Hutchinson and her fellow Antinomians, who put their faith in a person's inner knowledge of the Holy Spirit.

From 1836 to 1855, transcendentalism's influence was at its peak, and Hawthorne, though never a convinced transcendentalist himself, was sympathetic to some of the movement's ideals. He spent some time living at Brook Farm, where many transcendentalists experimented with communal living, and had some of his works published in *The Dial*, a transcendentalist magazine. Its first editor was Margaret Fuller, a woman who supposedly had a child out of wedlock and may have, along with the rebellious Puritan Anne Hutchinson, been a model for the heroine Hester Prynne. Perhaps Hawthorne's involvement with the transcendentalist movement influenced his views on the individual placed in opposition to society, which is one of the primary issues explored in *The Scarlet Letter*. Certainly he questioned the movement's view of innate human goodness, exposing instead a more complex view of human nature that included a focus, through his character Chillingworth, on a human tendency to commit evil.

Public Reaction to The Scarlet Letter

Upon its publication, *The Scarlet Letter* was almost universally praised by critics, who lauded Hawthorne's ability to portray the deepest passions of his characters. E.P. Whipple, a widely read and influential critic of the day, gave Hawthorne abundant praise, writing that the book “bears on every page the evidence of a mind thoroughly alive, watching patiently the movements of morbid hearts when stirred by strange experiences” (Whipple in Mellow, p. 316).

On the other hand, some critics were taken aback by the scandalous subject matter of *The Scarlet Letter*. They felt that the topic of the novel was revolting, an opinion that found its way into reviews of the day. Hawthorne also received quite a bit of backlash at home in Salem. The backlash was attached mainly to the introductory essay, “The Customs House.” The veiled critical references in the essay to the politicians of the town did not go unnoticed, and he received quite a bit of negative response from the citizens of Salem. Hawthorne became so upset by their criticism that he made a public “declaration of independence from his birthplace,” claiming that “henceforth, it ceases to be a reality in my life. I am a citizen of somewhere else” (Hawthorne in Mellow, p. 317).

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