

Name _____ Class _____ Date _____

Summer Enrichment (11th Grade)
The Scarlett Letter
The Novel at a Glance

MORE ABOUT THE WRITER

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born in Salem, Massachusetts, on July 4, 1804, into a prominent Puritan family. The earliest of his American ancestors, William Hathorne (as the name was spelled before Nathaniel changed it), arrived in the Colonies in 1630—the year the Boston Colony was founded. This soldier and magistrate is now mainly remembered for having condemned a Quaker woman to be led around by a cart and whipped through the streets of Boston and other towns. His early forebears had a prominent place in Hawthorne’s thinking, representing both solid accomplishment and great guilt—conflicting attributes Hawthorne was to associate with Puritanism generally.

After graduation, Hawthorne returned to Salem, where he spent the next twelve years in relative seclusion, reading and writing instead of entering a business or profession as his relatives had expected. During this period, he soaked up the history and lore of this seaport town, which was to become the setting for many of his stories and for his novel *The House of the Seven Gables*. His first novel, *Fanshawe: A Tale*, was published anonymously at his own expense. Although it was not a success and Hawthorne later recalled and destroyed all the copies he could, *Fanshawe* did attract the attention of a publisher, who published some of his stories, later reprinted as *Twice-Told Tales*. Many of these stories deal with guilt and the Puritan moral code—elements later to figure prominently in his major novels.

Unable to support himself through writing alone, Hawthorne worked for a while in the Boston customhouse and then joined Brook Farm, an experimental community of philosophers and writers, where he hoped to be able to live and write. However, he did not share the optimistic idealism of the other members of the community and, in any case, was ill-suited to communal life. In 1842, Hawthorne married Sophia Peabody, one of three daughters of a distinguished family. The marriage was happy. Sophia provided understanding and encouragement. The strength and nobility of Hester Prynne, the heroine of *The Scarlet Letter*, reflect qualities Hawthorne found in his wife.

The newlyweds settled in Concord, Massachusetts, where they had as neighbors and associates Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Amos Bronson Alcott. These liberal thinkers rejected the spirit of Puritanism; although influenced by them, Hawthorne could not find in their idealistic philosophy a satisfactory moral guide. In time, lack of money forced Hawthorne to serve as surveyor in the Salem customhouse—an institution he satirizes in “The Custom House,” the long introduction he appended to *The Scarlet Letter*. A change in political administrations cost Hawthorne his job in 1849, but by this time he was completing *The Scarlet Letter*, which brought him considerable success.

Only a year after the appearance of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne published *The House of the Seven Gables*. Unlike *The Scarlet Letter*, which was set in the Puritan past, this novel of guilt and unexpiated crime is set in Hawthorne's own time. The curse that plays such an important role in the lives of the Pyncheon family was traditionally supposed to have been uttered to his judge ancestor John Hathorne at the Salem witchcraft trials. The hereditary guilt that carries down to the narrator's own time reflects Hawthorne's awareness and sensitivity to his own Puritan background.

Three years after the publication of *The Scarlet Letter*, as a reward for writing a campaign biography of his friend Franklin Pierce, Hawthorne was appointed United States Consul to Liverpool, a position he held for four years. He lived for several years in Rome, where he was shocked and fascinated by the sophisticated life of the continent, an experience he drew upon in his novel *The Marble Faun*. This proved to be Hawthorne's last complete work of fiction.

Hawthorne has long been considered one of America's greatest writers. In *The Scarlet Letter*, he was one of the earliest to write a truly psychological novel; his celebrated short stories helped to establish the genre as an American art form. His powerful accounts of human loneliness, sin, unmerited suffering, and expiation have made and continue to make a profound impression on readers.

MAJOR CHARACTERS IN THE SCARLETT LETTER

Hester Prynne, a young Englishwoman, has been living alone in Boston; her husband has been missing for several years. Hester has given birth to a child and refuses to name its father (Dimmesdale). Over the course of the novel, she pays for her sin in many ways, although she never renounces her love for Dimmesdale.

Arthur Dimmesdale is a popular and admired young clergyman. Refusing to acknowledge that he is the father of Hester's child, he undergoes intense internal suffering and becomes prey to Chillingworth's slow revenge.

Roger Chillingworth, Hester's husband, a scholar much older than she, arrives in Boston after years of captivity to find that his wife has just given birth to a daughter. Chillingworth is the major antagonist. The novel chronicles his spiritual deterioration as he takes revenge on Dimmesdale, whom he suspects, correctly, of being the child's father.

Pearl, the daughter, is a blithe, highly intuitive, intelligent, and imaginative child.

ASSIGNMENT:

Symbolism: Literary Analysis

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne makes extensive use of symbols—people, places, or objects that are made to take on a larger meaning. Compose an essay explaining the central symbols of the novel and how they are used to illustrate a particular theme. (*Critical Writing*)

- **500 words typed**
- **Heading: Name/Date/Period**
- **Double spaced**

- 12 font times New Roman
- Title: Symbolism in The Scarlett Letter
- Cite evidence from the text
- Due Friday of the first week of school

RESOURCES:

Digital Novel: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/25344/25344-h/25344-h.htm>

Scholarly Article: <http://www.hawthorneinsalem.org/ScholarsForum/MMD2575.html>

Prewriting

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