Nathaniel HAWTHORNE

The Scarlet LETTER

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Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864) was born in Salem, Massachusetts, where, after his graduation from Bowdoin College in Maine, he wrote the bulk of his masterful tales of American colonial history, many of which were collected in his *Twice-told Tales* (1837). In 1839 and 1840 Hawthorne worked in the Boston Customs House, then spent most of 1841 at the experimental community of Brook Farm. After his marriage to Sophia Peabody, he settled in the "Old Manse" in Concord; there, between 1842 and 1845, he wrote most of the tales gathered in *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846). His career as a novelist began with *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), whose famous preface recalls his 1846–1849 service in "The Custom-House" of Salem. *The House of the Seven Gables* (1951) and *The Blithedale Romance* (1952) followed in rapid succession. After a third political appointment—this time as American Consul in Liverpool, England, from 1853 to 1857—Hawthorne's life was marked by the publication of *The Marble Faun* (1960) but also by a sad inability to complete several more long romances. Ill health, apparently, and possibly some failure of literary faith finally eroded Hawthorne's ability to make imaginative sense of America's distinctive moral experience.

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The Scarlet Letter

A ROMANCE

A Penguin Enriched eBook Classic

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INTRODUCTION

I

On the night of February 3, 1850, Nathaniel Hawthorne read the ending of *The Scarlet Letter: A Romance*, which he had just finished writing, to his wife. "It broke her heart and sent her to bed with a grievous headache," he wrote jubilantly to a friend the next day, "which I look upon as a triumphant success! Judging from its effect," he continued, "I may calculate on what bowlers call a ten-strike!" After twenty-five years of patient, unrewarded literary effort, Hawthorne seemed about to win fame and fortune. He was almost forty-six years old and—as the uncharacteristic exclamation points in his letter reveal—feverishly excited at the prospect.

His expectation, as it turned out, was both right and wrong. Applauded from the start as a literary classic, *The Scarlet Letter* continues to hold its place among American masterworks. Yet it sold no more than 7,800 copies during Hawthorne's lifetime, netting him only about $1,500. Although such a sum is now worth much more than in Hawthorne's time, it certainly did not translate into wealth. The author was disappointed in his hope that the book would be a "ten-strike" and, indeed, he never realized his goal of becoming a great popular success.

Today virtually every American writer of fiction hopes to produce a novel that will be both a "blockbuster" bestseller and great literature. In the early nineteenth century, when Nathaniel Hawthorne was a boy, authorship was in the process of evolving into a profession whose rewards might be riches as well as reputation. Before his time, a would-be author had to get up a subscription list before publishing, and sales would be limited to those who had signed up. No more copies would be printed than had been ordered. This system, known as the patronage system, was an author's only hope for self-sufficiency in times when most people couldn't read, and when only a very few had money to buy books, leisure to enjoy them, or easy access to sources of distribution. But technology brought change.

Books became cheaper to print, bind, and ship. Transportation networks developed, allowing books to be distributed at some distances from the place of publication. Increasingly, those in the ever-expanding middle class turned to books for knowledge, for enjoyment, and perhaps above all for an enlargement of their experience. Now, instead of being confined to an elite group of patrons, authors could dream of reaching large numbers of people from all walks of life. Their books, selling at low prices but marketed in huge quantities, could bring writers reputation and fortune as never before in literary history.

Inspired by such early examples of popular success as Sir Walter Scott, the book-loving Hawthorne determined in his boyhood to become an author. Unlike many who abandon this ambition as the challenges of the profession become ever more clear, Hawthorne stuck to his aims. After graduating from Bowdoin College in 1825, he rejected the standard professions open to the college graduate of that era and returned to his family home in the seaport town of Salem, Massachusetts. There he lived for twelve years, working on his writing.

Hawthorne made his home with the family of his mother, Elizabeth Manning. Hawthorne's father, Nathaniel senior, had been a ship's captain who was away at sea most of the time and died in 1808 when the boy was only four. Rather than losing a father in early childhood, Hawthorne, psychologically speaking, never had one—his father was at home for no more than seven months of Hawthorne's life. Shortly after the father's death, Elizabeth moved out of the Hathorne (as the name was then spelled) residence and went back to the Mannings, among whom she felt more comfortable. Nathaniel senior's widowed mother and unmarried sisters did not approve of Elizabeth, a blacksmith's daughter. Although they lived in genteel poverty themselves, they thought of themselves as aristocrats. No matter that Elizabeth's father had gone from blacksmithing to business and was prospering; they preferred to associate with the shipowners and importers whose families had made Salem an important seaport in the eighteenth century. Thus, after Elizabeth returned to her own people there was little contact between her and the Hathornes, even though they lived just across the back fence from each other.

The Mannings were a large, closely knit family. All except Elizabeth either married late in life or remained single; hence, when she brought her three children into the household, there were fourteen people living under

one roof. But Nathaniel and his two sisters were the only children. A world unto themselves, the Mannings did not seek extensive acquaintance with others in Salem, and therefore the young boy had few playmates. His tendency toward solitude and fantasy was strengthened when he hurt his foot at about age nine and was lame for more than a year. Books became his closest friends.

The Mannings had bought land in Maine and chose Bowdoin College, in nearby Brunswick, for Hawthorne's education. He was the first member of either the Manning or Hathorne family to receive a college education and, no doubt, his aunts and uncles were disappointed when he failed to make use of it. But they were also a very tolerant group and put little pressure on him to change his ways when he returned to Salem in 1825. For twelve years, then, he lived quietly at home, reading and writing. He read contemporary magazines to learn the popular taste, and he read extensively in New England history (especially of the Puritan and Revolutionary eras) to provide himself with subject matter for his stories. It was through his reading that he learned about the Hathorne family, the participation of his ancestors in the settling of Salem and in the witch trials of the 1690s. At this time he changed the spelling of his last name, perhaps as a gesture of separation from these judgmental people who had hanged witches and wanted nothing to do with his mother and himself.

The output of these twelve years was extensive, but Hawthorne destroyed perhaps as much as two-thirds of it. He published a short novel, *Fanshawe*, anonymously in 1827, and not until after his death was the authorship revealed. Even his wife did not know that he had written it. The surviving stories and sketches show a remarkably mature style, a mastery of sentence structure and vocabulary, nuance, setting, mood, and story line. They also reveal an imagination brooding over private, somewhat disquieting themes—solitude, secrecy, voyeurism, obsession with evil—and tend to focus relentlessly on a single gloomy effect. Hawthorne's contemporaries wanted their historical fiction to be upbeat and patriotic; they loved exciting melodrama but had no attachment to gloom. And they greatly preferred variety to unity in a literary work. Thus, despite his wish to achieve popular success, Hawthorne from the start displayed a literary temperament at odds with audience taste. His works of the Salem years, often published anonymously, did not attract a following. Financial self-sufficiency seemed as remote in 1837, when he collected some of his

published pieces into a volume called *Twice-Told Tales*, as it had been a dozen years before. And now he was thirty-three years old.

Twice-Told Tales brought Hawthorne very little money but did attract critical attention. It was noticed by a fellow Salemite, Elizabeth Peabody, a vigorous young woman of extraordinary generosity, involved in every scheme to do good that flourished in her time, perpetually disappointed but invariably optimistic. With typical energy, she sought Hawthorne out, brought him to parties and gatherings, helped him make contacts, and—incidentally—introduced him to her much more conventional sister, Sophia, whom he was to marry in 1842. Inspired by love and the desire to join the world, Hawthorne entered a period of experimentation, trying different jobs, different styles of life, different places of residence. He lived briefly at Brook Farm, the Utopian agricultural commune. After his marriage he resided in Concord, Massachusetts, where he socialized with such Transcendental writers as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller. Hawthorne looked to books for fantasy, the Transcendentalists looked for ideas; Hawthorne was in some ways unrealistic, the Transcendentalists in other ways even more so. But they were a gregarious, lively, articulate, and serious group of people whose intellectual boldness did Hawthorne a great deal of good.

During the Concord years, immediately after his marriage, Hawthorne wrote a number of new sketches and stories, all of which were published. But by 1846, now with a young family, he still had no regular income. Reluctantly, he went back to Salem to take a patronage job. His work at the Salem Custom House was supposed to involve so few duties that he would have time for writing. In fact, however, the oppressive atmosphere of its daily routine deadened his imagination. Salem had long since been surpassed by Boston as the major port city; after his sojourn among the Transcendentalists Hawthorne found it intellectually as well as economically depressed. But at least he had a secure job—or thought he did, for he had been assured that this position would be exempted from the usual turmoils of the spoils system. Imagine his dismay, then, when the Democrats lost the election of 1848 and Hawthorne was informed that he was to be fired. For months he tried desperately to keep the position, but to no avail. And just as his successor was officially appointed in the summer of 1849, his mother (who had been living with his family) suddenly died.

Although neither Hawthorne nor his mother was a particularly demonstrative person, the tie between them was very strong. Hawthorne's boyhood letters to her suggest that he thought of all the Manning uncles and aunts as so many intruders in the core family of his mother and her children. His adolescent fantasy had been of the four of them living apart from the rest of the world in Maine. For a brief while, in fact, Mrs. Hawthorne actually did reside there; but, cruelly, Hawthorne was forced to stay behind in Salem to prepare for college. "I hope, Dear Mother," he wrote her when he was seventeen, "that you will not be tempted by any entreaties to return to Salem to live…If you remove to Salem, I shall have no Mother to return to during the College vacations…. If you remain where you are, think how delightfully the time will pass with all your children around you, shut out from the world with nothing to disturb us. It will be a second garden of Eden." To the end of his life, the matriarchal fantasy would remain Hawthorne's most precious dream, the ideal by which he judged the grim communities he created and found them wanting.

To lose his livelihood and this beloved only parent at the same time was devastating. According to Sophia, he was seriously ill for a time after his mother's death. But he recovered to write *The Scarlet Letter*—perhaps recovered *through* writing *The Scarlet Letter*, which is intricately tied to his life experience, without showing many signs of conventional autobiography. Recalling the night of his reading it to Sophia he wrote later in his journal (1855): "…my voice swelled and heaved, as if I were tossed up and down on an ocean as it subsided after a storm. But I was in a very nervous state, then, having gone through a great diversity and severity of emotion, for many months past. I think I have never overcome my own adamant in any other instance." Though the instance he refers to here is that of the reading, he must surely have had in mind the writing of his book as well. His literary aims had always been large, but his method of carrying them out over the years had been cautious and self-doubting. For once he had overcome his own "adamant" and written freely, with a passion and intensity he had not permitted himself before and was unable to attain again.

Of course, deep feeling is not sufficient to create a great or even a good book. It is not enough to be sincere. All the years of patient work found fulfillment in *The Scarlet Letter*. The techniques he had perfected over two decades came into full play. It bears the signature of his style and artistry on

every page. Yet, *The Scarlet Letter* has something more than his other works do—a central character of majestic resonance and scope. This is Hester Prynne, the first and arguably still the greatest heroine in American literature. And in her struggle with the community that tries to condemn and ignore her, *The Scarlet Letter* has a conflict of great thematic significance.

II

The opening chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*, "The Prison-Door," arrests us on the threshold of the narrative and builds suspense. It also creates sympathy for the unknown person who is about to emerge through the door, and foreshadows the conflicts to come. These achievements result from an accumulation of emotionally weighted details, beginning with the first sentence. Hawthorne wastes no time: "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."

Ask a group of readers what they picture from the phrase "sad-colored" and you will get a variety of answers—gray, brown, black. Hawthorne leaves individual readers free to imagine whatever particular color sadness may suggest. He does not, however, leave readers free to imagine a cheerful scene. In other words, he is more concerned to control emotional responses than visual images. The sadness of the scene enters even into the clothing, and is focused by the end of the sentence on the forbidding prison door with its heavy and hostile mixture of wood and iron. In the next paragraph the door is related to the crowd assembled outside it, even to the point of becoming its representative, symbolizing its temper and spirit. This is a prison-building, cemetery-constructing people. And they are contrasted in their outlook with an imagined "Utopia of human virtue and happiness."

The chapter continues to align its images on one or the other side of this opposition, at one pole the weatherbeaten prison with its "beetle-browed and gloomy front," which "seemed never to have known a youthful era," an "ugly edifice" surrounded by "unsightly vegetation" which is finally transformed into the "black flower of civilized society"; at the other the "wild rose-bush," with its "delicate gems" of "fragrance and fragile beauty." We have no choice but to associate the prisoner with the rose bush, all the

more so when we learn that it is said to have sprung up under the footsteps of the "sainted Anne Hutchinson," whom the Puritans had persecuted for preaching her own beliefs rather than those officially held by the ministerial elite. To associate the Puritans, through their prison, with ugliness, gloom, and age; to imply that the prisoner is delicate, fragile, somehow aligned to youth and beauty, is to manipulate our sympathies on her behalf.

Readers are further disarmed—those inclined to look with disfavor on criminals—when the narrator offers us a flower from the rose bush, for if we accept it we must go through the narrative metaphorically holding the prisoner's insignia, declared one of her party. And, finally, the narrator describes his story as "a tale of human frailty and sorrow" rather than one of crime or guilt, thus imposing a non-Puritan, or even anti-Puritan, interpretation on the events to come. Under the pressure of Hawthorne's art, the condemning Puritans have become offenders, and the one they have condemned has been made their victim.

The beautiful and dignified woman who emerges in Chapter 2 more than redeems Hawthorne's promises. "Had there been a Papist among the crowd of Puritans," Hawthorne observes, "he might have seen in this beautiful woman, so picturesque in her attire and mien, and with the infant at her bosom, an object to remind him of the image of Divine Maternity." But there is no Papist in the crowd—Hawthorne has invented him to remind us once again that the Puritans can be viewed in terms different from their own. Note that Hawthorne is not trying to present the Puritans either as they saw themselves, or as some objective "history" might see them. Details like Cornhill, Isaac Johnson's lot, and the old churchyard of King's Chapel show that Hawthorne has done his research and give us confidence that he won't make any factual errors, but they do not constitute a historical reconstruction. The important details in the chapter—iron spikes, ugly weeds, rose bush, black flower of civilized society, Divine Maternity—do not come from the historical scene. To describe a prison as an ugly flower and a flower as a beautiful jewel is to enter a realm of suggestiveness and symbolism far different from the arena of historical realism.

In brief, despite the usual accuracy of his detail and the demonstrable fullness of Hawthorne's knowledge of the historical Puritans, they are not his subject. The Puritans are used for purposes other than those they would have accepted as their own. Hawthorne has appropriated them and re-created them according to the needs of his story rather than the demands of

historical scholarship. In other words, we should not read Hawthorne to learn about the Puritans, nor assess him according to the accuracy and completeness of his historical detail. We should not even read him to discover what he thought *about* the Puritans, because those who appear in his work are not presented as imitations of the real people who once lived. They are quite frankly Puritans of the imagination. Hawthorne was neither a historical writer nor a realist.

Here is how Hawthorne, in his Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*, described his own intentions:

> When a writer calls his work a Romance,…he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a Novel. The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience. The former—while, as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably, so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart—has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation. If he think fit, also, he may so manage his atmospherical medium as to bring out or mellow the lights and deepen and enrich the shadows of the picture.

Hawthorne's careful distinction between his type of fiction, the romance, and another type, called the novel, is one that we no longer observe today, when any long fiction is called a novel. But Hawthorne's words guide us to the perception that he was writing about what goes on inside people, "the truth of the human heart," rather than what goes on outside and around them. Today we would label such writing "psychological," but the label would confuse us in Hawthorne's case because his work does not contain many of the features typical of psychological fiction: disrupted time sequences, stream-of-consciousness and interior monologue, lengthy flashbacks, dream sequences, and the like. In fact, Hawthorne was writing psychological fiction before the field of psychology had developed and before fictional techniques had been

developed to reflect this new knowledge. He had to invent his own system for representing psychological truth as he saw it.

He invented a system that corresponded to his purposes, using the heart's own strategies for representing its truths. All of us take real events, real people, and use them—greatly distorting their inherent reality and ignoring their autonomy in the process—to dramatize our psychic lives. For example, we take human mothers and fathers, about whose inner life we are mostly ignorant, and transform them into monsters and redeemers. This is unfair; yet these imaginary figures correspond to the roles these people play in our inner lives. Though false to their reality, our fantasies are true to us. And this is how Hawthorne used the Puritans. His stories do not imitate reality; they imitate fantasy. His characters are removed from the real, exterior world and re-created in the image of somebody's fantasy world.

But a person's fantasy world is immensely real to that person, and in many ways intricately connected to the outer world. Can any individual invariably distinguish between what he or she imagines to be so, and what really is so? If I believe I can vault over a fifteen-foot wall, reality will quickly correct my belief. But if I think a person dislikes me, how can I be enlightened? Worse still, if I act on my conviction, am I not likely to produce by my actions a person who really does dislike me? In these senses, fantasy or imagination is every bit as real, and has results as real, as the bricks or stones in the fifteen-foot wall. Contemporary psychological theories all recognize the power of the inner world and have elaborate languages to explain and characterize that world. This is no more than what Hawthorne over a century ago took as the basis of his fiction.

We can see this motif and its effects clearly in two of Hawthorne's famous stories of the Puritans, "Young Goodman Brown" (written in 1835) and "The Minister's Black Veil" (1836). Brown, despite his wife's pleas and against his own better judgment, goes off to the forest one night. There he witnesses and partly joins in a witches' initiation. Or he imagines, or dreams, that he does. If he sees a real meeting, then people are corrupt; if he imagines the whole thing, then *he* is corrupt—but the story never settles this point because something else is much more important. This is: that whether the event happened in the forest or happened in Brown's imagination makes no difference to Brown. It changes his life as though it had really happened, and thus so far as its consequences are concerned it really did happen. "Had goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest, and only dreamed a wild dream

of a witch meeting? Be it so, if you will. But, alas! It was a dream of evil omen to young goodman Brown. A stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man, did he become, from the night of that fearful dream." To think it is to make it real.

When the Reverend Hooper, in "The Minister's Black Veil," puts a piece of black gauze over his face, he means to make a statement about secret sin. That statement may be true, or it may be false. The story does not decide. But the act of putting on the veil altogether changes the course of Hooper's life, just as Brown's life was changed by his night in the forest. The veil disturbs his parishioners. They respond to it not as a neutral piece of black fabric, but as the instigator of uncomfortable feelings. The veil becomes for them what they imagine it to be. Their view of the minister changes (and indeed he is different, with a veil over his face, from what he was before); hence their behavior changes, and their lives, and his life as a member of the community. At the same time, the veil literally affects Hooper's own world view, because looking out through it he inevitably sees the world as darker than it "really is." A black veil, rose-colored glasses—the world always takes on the coloring of our temperaments, our imaginations, our anticipations, and our memories. In this sense, we can never see the world as it really is, as a pure reality. There is always a significant admixture of ourselves in every perception.

As befits a world view where the line between imagination and reality is impossible to draw, the atmosphere, setting, and action in Hawthorne's works are always a unique blending of the familiar and the strange, the logical and the dreamlike, the humdrum and the marvelous, or—in Hawthorne's words—the actual and the imaginary. He prefers settings far from his own time and place (the Puritans, remember, had flourished two centuries before his own era) where he can begin with sparse historical outlines and fill the scene with his own images and metaphors of the inner world. But Puritan Boston is not an arbitrary choice of setting, because the Puritan influence continues to operate in the nineteenth-century imagination—or so Hawthorne believes.

The Scarlet Letter is a more complex work than anything he had written before. Puritan Boston believes that adultery is a sin in the eyes of God and accordingly has made it a crime. Is this belief correct? *The Scarlet Letter* does not speak for God. The important point for the story is not whether adultery really is a sin, but how the belief that it is leads to certain actions

by the Puritans, and how these actions affect different people who themselves have different beliefs about adultery. Although Hester suffers enormously from the shame of her public disgrace and from the isolation of her punishment, in her inmost heart she can never accept the Puritan interpretation of her act. To her, the act is inseparable from love, love for Dimmesdale, love for Pearl. Because she does not believe that she did an evil thing, she retains her self-respect and survives her punishment with dignity, grace, and ever-growing strength of character. Dimmesdale, however, believes that the act is wicked, and the course of his life is toward increasing self-hatred, mental anguish, and despair. In a sense Hester's act and Dimmesdale's act are different acts because each perceives it differently. And, how differently these acts would be perceived by Hester, Dimmesdale, and the community were the society a permissive one!

Though *The Scarlet Letter* can thus be placed in the same family as the earlier Puritan stories, the character of Hester and the values associated with her make a great difference. If Hester were not in the story, or if Dimmesdale were the central character, then the book would be much more like "Young Goodman Brown" or "The Minister's Black Veil." Dimmesdale is a character who is apparently concerned to do good but is too deeply self-immersed to connect with others. He leaves Hester to support herself and Pearl despite the extremely limited possibilities for female self-sufficiency in Puritan Boston. When he thinks of the mother and child, Dimmesdale seems mainly to fear that some physical resemblance between Pearl and himself will reveal his sin to the world. In the famous forest scene (Chapters 17–19) Dimmesdale's conversation is all about his own sufferings and trials; he expects Hester to be fully involved in his problems, but has no thought for hers. Dimmesdale, almost like a stereotypical woman, manipulates her into suggesting that he run away, and then into volunteering to accompany him: always the emphasis is on what is best for him.

But on Election Day, when they are to leave (Chapters 22–23), he is so involved in the sermon he plans to deliver that he scarcely notices her. Finally, he calls her onto the scaffold with Pearl not to declare (at last) his undying love, but to fashion an emblem of *his* sin for the edification of the crowd and the salvation of his own soul. He rejects her heartfelt pleadings ("Shall we not meet again?…Shall we not spend our immortal life together? Surely, surely, we have ransomed one another, with all this woe") with a