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The Scarlet Letter

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CliffsNotes™ on Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter

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The Scarlet Letter

By Susan Van Kirk, M.A.

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- Preview an Introduction to the Novel
- Explore themes, literary devices, and character development in the Critical Commentaries
- Examine in-depth Character Analyses
- Reinforce what you learn with CliffsNotes Review
- Reinforce what you learn with CliffsNotes Review
- Find additional information to further your study in CliffsNotes Resource Center and online at www.cliffsnotes.com



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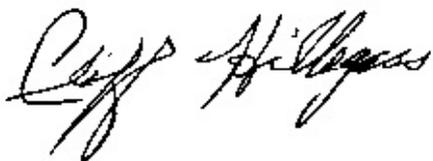
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Life And Background Of The Author

The following abbreviated biography of Nathaniel Hawthorne is provided so that you might become more familiar with his life and the historical times that possibly influenced his writing. Read this Life and Background of the Author section and recall it when reading Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, thinking of any thematic relationship between Hawthorne's work and his life.

Early/Formative Years

Born July 4, 1804, Nathaniel Hawthorne was the only son of Captain Nathaniel Hawthorne and Elizabeth Clarke Manning Hawthorne. (Hawthorne added the "w" to his name after he graduated from college.) Following the death of Captain Hawthorne in 1808, Nathaniel, his mother, and his two sisters were forced to move in with Mrs. Hawthorne's relatives, the Mannings. Here Nathaniel Hawthorne grew up in the company of women without a strong male role model; this environment may account for what biographers call his shyness and introverted personality.

This period of Hawthorne's life was mixed with the joys of reading and the resentment of financial dependence. While he studied at an early age with Joseph E. Worcester, a well-known lexicographer, he was not particularly fond of school. An injury allowed him to stay home for a year when he was nine, and his early "friends" were books by Shakespeare, Spenser, Bunyan, and 18th century novelists.

During this time Mrs. Hawthorne moved her family to land owned by the Mannings near Raymond, Maine. Nathaniel's fondest memories of these days were when "I ran quite wild, and would, I doubt not, have willingly run wild till this time, fishing all day long, or shooting with an old fowling piece." This idyllic life in the wilderness exerted its charm on the boy's imagination but ended in 1819 when he returned to Salem to prepare two years for college entrance.

Education

In 1821, Hawthorne entered Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine. Among his classmates were Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who would become a distinguished poet and Harvard professor, and Franklin Pierce, future 14th president of the United States. Another classmate, Horatio Bridge, was later to offer a Boston publisher a guarantee against loss if he would publish Hawthorne's first collection of short stories.

Hawthorne graduated middle of his class in 1825. Regarding his aspirations, he wrote, "I do not want to be a doctor and live by men's diseases, nor a minister to live by their sins, nor a lawyer to live by their quarrels. So, I don't see that there is anything left for me but to be an author."

Early Career

For the next 12 years, Hawthorne lived in comparative isolation in an upstairs chamber

at his mother's house, where he worked at perfecting his writing craft. He also began keeping notebooks or journals, a habit he continued throughout his life. He often jotted down ideas and descriptions, and his words are now a rich source of information about his themes, ideas, style experiments, and subjects.

In 1828, he published his first novel, *Fanshaw: A Tale*, at his own expense. *Fanshaw* was a short, imitation Gothic novel and poorly written. Dissatisfied with this novel, Hawthorne attempted to buy up all the copies so that no one could read it. He did not publish another novel for almost 25 years. By 1838, he had written two-thirds of the short stories he was to write in his lifetime. None of these stories gained him much attention, and he could not interest a publisher in printing a collection of his tales until 1837, when his college friend Horatio Bridge backed the publishing of *Twice-Told Tales*, a collection of Hawthorne's stories that had been published separately in magazines. His schoolmate and friend, Longfellow, reviewed the book with glowing terms. Edgar Allan Poe, known for his excoriating reviews of writers, not only wrote warmly of Hawthorne's book but also took the opportunity to define the short story in his now famous review. *Twice-Told Tales* is considered a masterpiece of literature, and it contains unmistakably American stories.

Financial Burdens and Marriage

In 1838, Hawthorne met Sophia Amelia Peabody, and the following year they were engaged. It was at this time that Hawthorne invested a thousand dollars of his meager capital in the Brook Farm Community at West Roxbury. There he became acquainted with Ralph Waldo Emerson and the naturalist Henry David Thoreau. These transcendentalist thinkers influenced much of Hawthorne's thinking about the importance of intuition rather than intellect in uncovering the truths of nature and human beings. Hawthorne left this experiment in November 1841, disillusioned with the viewpoint of the community, exhausted from the work, and without financial hope that he could support a wife. From this experience, however, he gained the setting for a later novel, *The Blithedale Romance*.

In a trip to Boston after leaving Brook Farm, Hawthorne reached an understanding about a salary for future contributions to the *Democratic Review*. He and Sophia married in Boston on July 9, 1842, and left for Concord, Massachusetts, where they took up residence in the now-famous "Old Manse."

New Challenges and Writings

Hawthorne's life at the "Old Manse" was happy and productive, and these were some of the happiest years of his life. He was newly married, in love with his wife, and surrounded by many of the leading literary figures of the day: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and Bronson Alcott. During this time, Hawthorne wrote for the *Democratic Review* and produced some tales that would be published in 1846 in *Mosses from an Old Manse*.

Financial problems continued to plague the family, however. The birth of their first

child, Una, caused Hawthorne to once again seek a financially secure job. With the help of his old friends, Hawthorne was appointed a surveyor for the port of Salem. His son, Julian, was born in 1846. Although the new job eased the financial problems for the family, Hawthorne again found little time to pursue his writing. Nevertheless, during this time, he was already forming ideas for a novel based on his Puritan ancestry and introduced by a preface about the Custom House where he worked. When the Whigs won the 1848 election, Hawthorne lost his position. It was a financial shock to the family, but it fortuitously provided him with time to write *The Scarlet Letter*.

The Golden Years of Writing

During these years Hawthorne was to write some of the greatest prose of his life. In 1849, Hawthorne wrote *The Scarlet Letter*, which won him much fame and greatly increased his reputation. While warmly received here and abroad, *The Scarlet Letter* sold only 8,000 copies in Hawthorne's lifetime.

In 1849, when the family moved to Lennox, Massachusetts, Hawthorne made the acquaintance of Herman Melville, a young writer who became a good friend. Hawthorne encouraged the young Melville, who later thanked him by dedicating his book, *Moby Dick*, to him. During this—the “Little Red House” period in Lennox—Hawthorne wrote *The House of the Seven Gables* and some minor works that were published in 1851.

Around the time that Nathaniel and Sophia's second daughter, Rose, was born, the family moved to West Newton, where Hawthorne finished and published his novel about the Brook Farm experience, *The Blithedale Romance*, and also *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys*. Because there was little to no literature published for children, Hawthorne's book was unique in this area.

Later Writing and Years Abroad

In Concord, the Hawthornes found a permanent house, along with nine acres of land, which they purchased from Bronson Alcott, the transcendentalist writer and father of Louisa May Alcott. Hawthorne renamed the house The Wayside, and in May, 1852, he and his family moved in. Here, Hawthorne was to write only two of his works: *Tanglewood Tales*, another collection designed for young readers, and *A Life of Pierce*, a campaign biography for his old friend from college. As a result of the biography, President Pierce awarded Hawthorne with an appointment as United States consul in Liverpool, England. The Hawthornes spent the next seven years in Europe.

Although Hawthorne wrote no additional fiction while serving as consul, he kept a journal that later served as a source of material for *Our Old Home*, a collection of sketches dealing with English scenery, life, and manners published in 1863. While in Italy, Hawthorne kept a notebook that provided material for his final, complete work of fiction, which was published in England as *Transformation* and, in America, as *The Marble Faun*.

The Autumn of His Life

By the autumn of 1863, Hawthorne was a sick man. In May, 1864, he traveled to New Hampshire with his old classmate Pierce in search of improved health. During this trip, he died in his sleep on May 19, 1864, in Plymouth, New Hampshire. He was buried in the Sleepy Hollow Cemetery at Concord. Widely eulogized as one of America's foremost writers, his fellow authors gathered to show their respect. Among his pallbearers were Longfellow, Holmes, Lowell, and Emerson. Today he rests there with Washington Irving, Emerson, Thoreau, and the Alcotts, as well as his wife, Sophia.

Introduction To The Novel

The following Introduction section is provided solely as an educational tool and is not meant to replace the experience of your reading the work. Read the Introduction and A Brief Synopsis to enhance your understanding of the work and to prepare yourself for the critical thinking that should take place whenever you read any work of fiction or nonfiction. Keep the List of Characters and Character Map at hand so that as you read the original literary work, if you encounter a character about whom you're uncertain, you can refer to the List of Characters and Character Map to refresh your memory.

Introduction

“The life of the Custom House lies like a dream behind me . . . Soon, likewise, my old native town will loom upon me through the haze of memory, a mist brooding over and around it; as if it were no portion of the real earth, but an overgrown village in cloud-land, with only imaginary inhabitants to people its wooden houses, and walk its homely lanes, and the unpicturesque prolixity of its main street . . . It may be, however,—oh, transporting and triumphant thought!—that the great-grandchildren of the present race may sometimes think kindly of the scribbler of bygone days . . .”

In the mid-1800s when Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote these words in the Custom House preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, he could not have imagined the millions of readers a century later who would “think kindly of the scribbler of bygone days” and continue to make his novel a best-seller. The mist of imagination that falls over Salem, Massachusetts, in his description is the same aura that permeates the setting of his novel. Look for the Boston of 1640 in history books, and you will not find the magical and Gothic elements that abound in Hawthorne’s story. For the mind of genius has created a Boston that is shrouded in darkness and mystery and surrounded by a forest of sunshine and shadow. In writing *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne was creating a form of fiction he called the psychological romance, and woven throughout his novel are elements of Gothic literature. What he created would later be followed by other romances, but never would they attain the number of readers or the critical acclaim of *The Scarlet Letter*.

Hawthorne began *The Scarlet Letter* in September, 1849, and finished it, amazingly, in February, 1850. Its publication made his literary reputation and temporarily eased some of his financial burdens. This novel was the culmination of Hawthorne’s own reading, study, and experimentation with themes about the subjects of Puritans, sin, guilt, and the human conflict between emotions and intellect. Since its first publishing in March of 1850, *The Scarlet Letter* has never been out of print. Even today, Hawthorne’s romance is one of the best-selling books on the market. Perhaps *The Scarlet Letter* is so popular, generation after generation, because its beauty lies in the layers of meaning and the uncertainties and ambiguities of the symbols and characters.

Each generation can interpret it and see relevance in its subtle meanings and appreciate the genius lying behind what many critics call “the perfect book.”

An interest in the past was not new to Hawthorne. As a boy, he had read novelists, such as James Fenimore Cooper and Sir Walter Scott, who wrote historical romances. Although the past appeared an appropriate subject for romance, Hawthorne wanted to go beyond the shallow characters of his predecessors’ books and create what he called a “psychological romance”—one that would contain all the conventional techniques of romance but add deep, probing portraits of human beings in conflict with themselves.

Complementing this intriguing theory of a new type of romance, Hawthorne’s writing prior to 1850 hinted at the masterpiece yet to come. In “The Gentle Boy,” he wrote of an emotional creature faced with the hostility of Puritans, who did not understand emotions. The ambiguity of sin was the subject of still another story, “Young Goodman Brown.” These stories helped Hawthorne develop some of the themes that would become part of *The Scarlet Letter*. Two other stories that would predate the conflict of head and heart in his novel were “Rappaccini’s Daughter” and “The Birthmark.” The cold intellect of Chillingworth, man of science, can be seen in the earlier conflict of these two stories. Both concern men of science or cold intellect who lack human sympathy and compassion and so sacrifice loved ones. This idea was further developed in “Ethan Brand,” a study in the conflict of head and heart. In this story, Hawthorne defined the unpardonable sin as the domination of intellect over emotion. He was to develop this idea in *The Scarlet Letter* with his portrayal of Chillingworth, the husband who seeks revenge.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, the reader should be prepared to meet the real and the unreal, the actual and the imaginary, the probable and the improbable, all seen in the moonlight with the warmer light of a coal fire changing their hues. What is Truth and what is Imagination? This is the Boston of the Puritans: Bible-reading, rule making, judgment framing. Surrounding it is the forest of the Devil, dark, shadowy, momentarily filled with sunlight, but always the home of those who would break the rules and those who listen to their passions. Enter this setting with Hawthorne and ample imagination, and the reader will find a story difficult to forget.

A Brief Synopsis

In June 1642, in the Puritan town of Boston, a crowd gathers to witness an official punishment. A young woman, Hester Prynne, has been found guilty of adultery and must wear a scarlet A on her dress as a sign of shame. Furthermore, she must stand on the scaffold for three hours, exposed to public humiliation. As Hester approaches the scaffold, many of the women in the crowd are angered by her beauty and quiet dignity. When demanded and cajoled to name the father of her child, Hester refuses.

As Hester looks out over the crowd, she notices a small, misshapen man and recognizes him as her long-lost husband, who has been presumed lost at sea. When the husband sees Hester’s shame, he asks a man in the crowd about her and is told the story of his wife’s adultery. He angrily exclaims that the child’s father, the partner in the adulterous act, should also be punished and vows to find the man. He chooses a

new name—Roger Chillingworth—to aid him in his plan.

Reverend John Wilson and the minister of her church, Arthur Dimmesdale, question Hester, but she refuses to name her lover. After she returns to her prison cell, the jailer brings in Roger Chillingworth, a physician, to calm Hester and her child with his roots and herbs. Dismissing the jailer, Chillingworth first treats Pearl, Hester's baby, and then demands to know the name of the child's father. When Hester refuses, he insists that she never reveal that he is her husband. If she ever does so, he warns her, he will destroy the child's father. Hester agrees to Chillingworth's terms even though she suspects she will regret it.

Following her release from prison, Hester settles in a cottage at the edge of town and earns a meager living with her needlework. She lives a quiet, somber life with her daughter, Pearl. She is troubled by her daughter's unusual character. As an infant, Pearl is fascinated by the scarlet A. As she grows older, Pearl becomes capricious and unruly. Her conduct starts rumors, and, not surprisingly, the church members suggest Pearl be taken away from Hester.

Hester, hearing the rumors that she may lose Pearl, goes to speak to Governor Bellingham. With him are Reverends Wilson and Dimmesdale. When Wilson questions Pearl about her catechism, she refuses to answer, even though she knows the correct response, thus jeopardizing her guardianship. Hester appeals to Reverend Dimmesdale in desperation, and the minister persuades the governor to let Pearl remain in Hester's care.

Because Reverend Dimmesdale's health has begun to fail, the townspeople are happy to have Chillingworth, a newly arrived physician, take up lodgings with their beloved minister. Being in such close contact with Dimmesdale, Chillingworth begins to suspect that the minister's illness is the result of some unconfessed guilt. He applies psychological pressure to the minister because he suspects Dimmesdale to be Pearl's father. One evening, pulling the sleeping Dimmesdale's vestment aside, Chillingworth sees something startling on the sleeping minister's pale chest: a scarlet A.

Tormented by his guilty conscience, Dimmesdale goes to the square where Hester was punished years earlier. Climbing the scaffold, he sees Hester and Pearl and calls to them to join him. He admits his guilt to them but cannot find the courage to do so publicly. Suddenly Dimmesdale sees a meteor forming what appears to be a gigantic A in the sky; simultaneously, Pearl points toward the shadowy figure of Roger Chillingworth. Hester, shocked by Dimmesdale's deterioration, decides to obtain a release from her vow of silence to her husband. In her discussion of this with Chillingworth, she tells him his obsession with revenge must be stopped in order to save his own soul.

Several days later, Hester meets Dimmesdale in the forest, where she removes the scarlet letter from her dress and identifies her husband and his desire for revenge. In this conversation, she convinces Dimmesdale to leave Boston in secret on a ship to Europe where they can start life anew. Renewed by this plan, the minister seems to gain new energy. Pearl, however, refuses to acknowledge either of them until Hester replaces her symbol of shame on her dress.

Returning to town, Dimmesdale loses heart in their plan: He has become a changed man and knows he is dying. Meanwhile, Hester is informed by the captain of the ship on which she arranged passage that Roger Chillingworth will also be a passenger.

On Election Day, Dimmesdale gives what is declared to be one of his most inspired sermons. But as the procession leaves the church, Dimmesdale stumbles and almost falls. Seeing Hester and Pearl in the crowd watching the parade, he climbs upon the scaffold and confesses his sin, dying in Hester's arms. Later, witnesses swear that they saw a stigmata in the form of a scarlet A upon his chest. Chillingworth, losing his revenge, dies shortly thereafter and leaves Pearl a great deal of money, enabling her to go to Europe with her mother and make a wealthy marriage.

Several years later, Hester returns to Boston, resumes wearing the scarlet letter, and becomes a person to whom other women turn for solace. When she dies, she is buried near the grave of Dimmesdale, and they share a simple slate tombstone with the inscription "On a field, sable, the letter A gules."

List of Characters

Hester Prynne A young woman sent to the colonies by her husband, who plans to join her later but is presumed lost at sea. She is a symbol of the acknowledged sinner; one whose transgression has been identified and who makes appropriate, socio-religious atonement.

Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale Dimmesdale is the unmarried pastor of Hester's congregation; he is also the father of Hester's daughter, Pearl. He is a symbol of the secret sinner; one who recognizes his transgression but keeps it hidden and secret, even to his own downfall.

Pearl Pearl is the illegitimate daughter of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale. She is the living manifestation of Hester's sin and a symbol of the product of the act of adultery and of an act of passion and love.

Roger Chillingworth The pseudonym assumed by Hester Prynne's aged scholar-husband. He is a symbol of evil, of the "devil's handyman," of one consumed with revenge and devoid of compassion.

Governor Bellingham This actual historical figure, Richard Bellingham, was elected governor in 1641, 1654, and 1665. In *The Scarlet Letter*, he witnesses Hester's punishment and is a symbol of civil authority and, combined with John Wilson, of the Puritan Theocracy.

Mistress Hibbins Another historical figure, Ann Hibbins, sister of Governor Bellingham, was executed for witchcraft in 1656. In the novel, she has insight into the sins of both Hester and Dimmesdale and is a symbol of

super or preternatural knowledge and evil powers.

John Wilson The historical figure on whom this character is based was an English-born minister who arrived in Boston in 1630. He is a symbol of religious authority and, combined with Governor Bellingham, of the Puritan Theocracy.