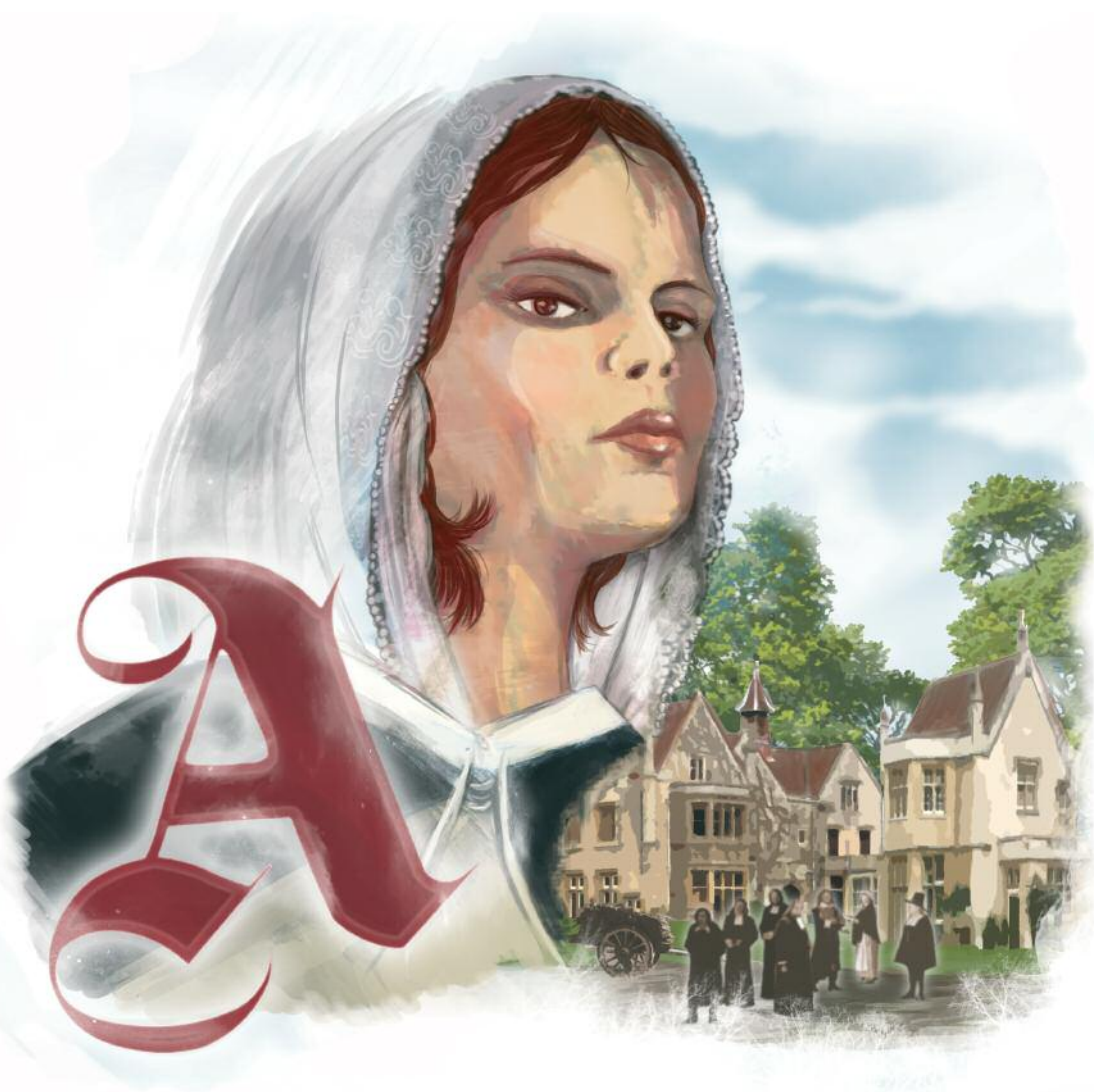
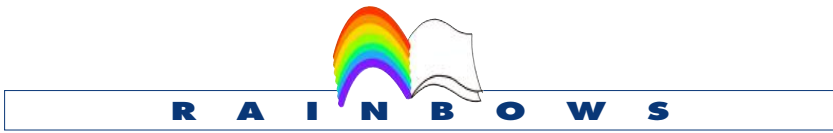




The Scarlet Letter

Nathaniel Hawthorne





Nathaniel Hawthorne

The Scarlet Letter

Adaptation, dossiers and activities
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edisco

The Scarlet Letter

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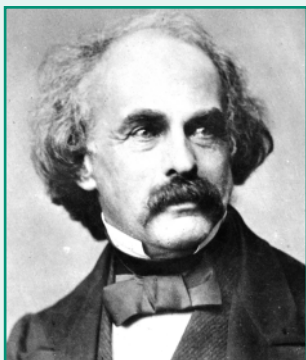
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

• Nathaniel Hawthorne	4
BEFORE READING	6
Chapter 1 – The Punishment	7
AFTER READING	18
BEFORE READING	22
Chapter 2 – Hester and Pearl	23
AFTER READING	34
• Extension: <i>The Puritans' Way of Life</i>	37
BEFORE READING	39
Chapter 3 – The Leech and His Patient	40
AFTER READING	52
BEFORE READING	56
Chapter 4 – Hester and the Doctor	57
AFTER READING	66
• Extension: <i>The native Americans in Puritan New England</i>	70
BEFORE READING	72
Chapter 5 – A Forest Walk	73
AFTER READING	84
BEFORE READING	88
Chapter 6 – Conclusion	89
AFTER READING	101
• Extension: <i>Superstition and Witchcraft in Puritan New England</i>	104
• SUMMING-UP ACTIVITIES	106
• GLOSSARY	107

The author

Nathaniel Hawthorne



Nathaniel Hawthorne was born in Salem, Massachusetts, in July 1804. His father, Nathaniel Senior, a sea captain, died when Nathaniel was four years old. His mother moved the family from Salem to Maine, where Hawthorne was educated at Bowdoin College (1821-24).

Between 1825 and 1836, Hawthorne worked as a writer and contributor¹ to magazines. His first novel, *Fanshawe* (1828), a story based on his college life, was published anonymously at his own expense. In the spring of 1837, many of his short stories were collected into one volume, *Twice-Told Tales*, which made him known locally.

In 1839, he accepted a job at the Boston Custom House². In Boston, he met Sophia Peabody and they married in 1842. The couple moved to their new house, 'The Old Manse', in Concord, Massachusetts, where they lived for three years. There, Hawthorne wrote most of the tales collected in *Mosses from an Old Manse* and also became friends with the well-known poets Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Between 1841 and 1842 a series of Hawthorne's books for children were also published.

Nathaniel and Sophia Hawthorne had three children: Una (1844), Julian (1846) and Rose (1851). The growing family and increasing debts compelled³ Nathaniel and Sophia to return to Salem. Hawthorne was unable to earn a living⁴ as a writer and, in 1846, he found work at the Port of Salem and later (1848) at the Salem Lyceum. But he soon returned to writing and in 1850, published *The Scarlet Letter*, which became an immediate best-seller. In the same year, Hawthorne and his family moved to a

1. *contributor*: journalist who regularly writes for specific newspapers or magazines.

2. *Custom House*: building where

imported and exported goods are checked.

3. *compelled*: obliged.

4. *earn a living*: earn enough money to live.

small farmhouse near Lenox, Massachusetts and he became friends with the famous novelist, Herman Melville, who was then writing *Moby Dick*, which he dedicated to Hawthorne.

The period in Lenox was very productive: *The Scarlet Letter* was followed by *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), based on the legend of a curse⁵ put on Hawthorne's own family by a woman condemned to death during the Salem witchcraft trials; *A Wonder-Book for Girls and Boys* (1851), a collection of classic myths retold; and *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), set in a utopian New England community.

In 1852, the Hawthornes returned to Concord. Hawthorne was made consul for the United States in Liverpool. In 1857, when this job finished, the Hawthorne family toured France and Italy, where Hawthorne wrote *The Marble Faun* (1860), a story about the conflict between innocence and guilt.

At the beginning of the American Civil War, Hawthorne travelled to Washington D.C., where he met Abraham Lincoln and other important figures. In 1862 he wrote about his experiences in the essay *Chiefly About War Matters*. While on a tour of the White Mountains, Hawthorne died in his sleep on May 19, 1864, in Plymouth, New Hampshire. He was buried on what is now known as 'Authors' Ridge' in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, Concord, Massachusetts.

Hawthorne's works belong to romanticism or, more specifically, to dark romanticism and all of them suggest that guilt⁶, sin, and evil⁷ are the most natural qualities of humanity. Many of his works, where historical facts are mixed with symbolism and psychological themes, are inspired by Puritan New England.

5. *curse*: words that cause trouble or harm.

commits a crime or an offence.

6. *guilt*: what one feels when he

7. *evil*: opposite of good.

Salem.



BEFORE READING

1 What do you think 'The Scarlet Letter' in the title is? Choose from the alternatives below.

- The first letter of the protagonist's name
- A letter connected to a magic ritual
- The mark of an event on which the story is based

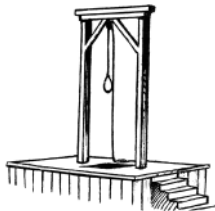
2 The story you are going to read is set in the Puritan Age (17th century). The picture on the right shows the typical clothing of the Puritans. Match the words in the box with the appropriate item.

- steeple-crowned hat
- collar
- coif
- apron
- cloak
- boots



3 The picture below shows three kinds of punishment inflicted in the Puritan Age. Match each picture with one of the words in the box.

pillory – whipping post – gallows



The Scarlet Letter

The Punishment

Chapter 1

On a certain summer morning, not less than two centuries ago, a crowd of men in sad-coloured clothes and grey, steeple-crowned hats, stood in front of the ugly, wooden building of the prison. The eyes of the inhabitants of Boston – then a little colonial town – were fixed on the closed door. Who or what were these severe Puritans waiting to see? Some noted culprit¹ to be put to death? An insolent servant or a naughty child that had to be punished at the whipping-post? A Quaker, or an Indian who had drunk too much white man's fire-water²? Might it be a witch³, like old Mistress Hibbins, the bitter-tempered widow of the magistrate, going to die upon the gallows?

In the crowd, there were several women who appeared to take a peculiar interest in the punishment that was going to take place.

"Good wives," said a well-built lady of fifty, "if we women judged such sinners as this Hester Prynne, she would be punished more severely!"

"People say," said another, "that the Reverend Master Dimmesdale, her good pastor, is extremely saddened by the scandal she has thrown upon his congregation."

"The magistrates have been too merciful," added a third matron. "They should have put the brand⁴ of a hot iron on Hester Prynne's forehead, instead of putting the mark of shame on her dress!"

"This woman has brought shame upon us all and should die," cried another female, the ugliest as well as the most pitiless of these self-styled judges.

"Mercy on us, good wife," exclaimed a man in the crowd, "Be silent now, the lock is turning in the prison-door, and here comes Mistress Prynne herself."

1. *culprit*: one who is guilty of a crime.
2. *fire-water*: alcoholic drink.

3. *witch*: a woman practising magic.
4. *brand*: mark.

When the door opened, the black figure of the town-officer appeared. Immediately behind him came Hester Prynne. The young woman had an air of natural dignity and force of character about her. In her arms she had a child, a baby three months old or so, who had been born in the darkness of the prison.

The young woman – the mother of this child – hesitated for a moment, then, with a burning blush⁵, and yet a proud smile, looked directly at her townspeople and neighbours. On the breast of her dress, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate gold embroidery⁶, appeared the letter A. It was of such splendor that it marked a contrast with the strict regulations of the colony.



The young woman was tall and elegant. She had dark abundant hair and her beautiful face was made more notable by deep dark eyes. She was lady-like⁷ and full of dignity. But the point which drew all eyes was that SCARLET LETTER, so fantastically embroidered on her bosom. It had the effect of a spell⁸, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity and placing her in a sphere by herself.

“She has good skill with her needle⁹, that’s certain,” remarked one of the female spectators, “but look how this hussy¹⁰ has made the mark of her shame colourful and showy!”

The grim¹¹ officer now made a gesture with his hand.

“Make way, good people, make way, in the King’s name,” he cried. “A blessing on the virtuous Colony of Massachusetts, where iniquity is brought out into the sunshine! Come, Madam Hester, and show your scarlet letter in the market-place!”

Hester Prynne advanced towards the place of her punishment. A group of curious schoolboys ran before her, turning their heads continually to stare¹² into her face, at the baby in her arms and at the ignominious letter on her breast. Trying to conceal her pain, Hester Prynne passed through the crowd and came to a

5. *blush*: reddening of face in shame.

6. *embroidery*: ornament on cloth.

7. *lady-like*: having the appearance of a lady.

8. *spell*: magic word or formula.

9. *needle*: metal instrument used to mend a dress or to embroider.

10. *hussy*: woman of immoral character.

11. *grim*: severe, merciless.

12. *stare*: look fixedly.



An old film version with Lillian Gish as Hester Prynne (1926).



A recent theater version (The College of Sequoias Theatre, Visalia, CA, 2005).



The young woman had an air of natural dignity...
In her arms she had a child, ... (illustration by H. Thomson, 1900).

sort of scaffold¹³, at the western extremity of the market-place. It was the platform of the pillory, which stood very close to Boston's most ancient church.

Hester Prynne's punishment consisted in standing for a certain time upon that platform. Up there, at moments, she felt like crying, like throwing herself from the scaffold down upon the ground. She felt as if she was going mad. Up there, all her life since her happy infancy flew before her eyes. Standing on that miserable platform, she saw again her native village, in Old England, and her paternal home, she saw her father's face, her mother's, too.

13. *scaffold*: a flat raised structure on which criminals are punished.