

TEACHER'S GUIDE

The Scarlet Letter

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born in Salem, Massachusetts in 1804. He came from an old Puritan family; one of his ancestors had helped bring the Massachusetts Bay Colony's charter from England, while another, John Hathorne (Nathaniel added the "w" to his name) had been a presiding judge at the Salem witchcraft trials. Hawthorne's father, a sea captain, died at sea when the boy was four. After attending Bowdoin College, where he became friends with future president Franklin Pierce, Hawthorne struggled to find his career. He worked as a customs inspector, lived briefly at the transcendentalist commune Brook Farm, married, and wrote an unsuccessful novel and several important short stories. Real fame came to him with the publication of *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850. Although he was closely acquainted with many New England writers, including Herman Melville and Ralph Waldo Emerson, he was essentially a solitary person. In later life he was sent by President Pierce as United States consul to Liverpool, England, and traveled in Europe, returning to America in 1860. Thereafter, his health declined, and he died in 1864, having published few important books in the last years of his life.

MAJOR WORKS

The Scarlet Letter is Hawthorne's most important novel. His two other major works of fiction are:

- *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851): An old Salem family sees the completion of a curse on their stock dating back to the witchcraft era.
- *The Blithedale Romance* (1852): A group of utopian reformers struggle with the problems of humanity, but fall victim to their own private faults.

Among Hawthorne's many short stories, two of the finest are:

- "Young Goodman Brown." A young husband is devastated to discover the corruption that dominates his wife and all those he had thought most virtuous in Salem.
- "The Birthmark." A scientist's quest for perfect beauty results in the death of his nearly-ideal wife.

These stories were originally published in Hawthorne's *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846) and are available in many anthologies.

CHIEF CHARACTERISTICS

Hawthorne was most concerned with examining what his friend Herman Melville described as "the power of blackness." From his Puritan ancestry he inherited a profound awareness of human evil. He did, however, reject Puritanism itself as a hypocritical system of attacking the evil in others while allowing corruption to flourish under cover of respectable outward behavior. The Salem tradition also left him with a belief that secret guilt will eventually come forth, destroying men like Dimmesdale and families like the Hathornes, who are described in the opening pages of *The Scarlet Letter*.

Hawthorne's most unsympathetic characters are not the sinners like Dimmesdale and Hester Prynne, nor even the unthinking crowd that condemns them. The worst people, he believes, are those like Chillingworth or the many sinister doctors and scientists in his short fiction who coldly seek intellectual truth and moral or physical perfection at the expense of more human emotional qualities. If anything can save his characters—and often nothing can—it is love, whether for a spouse, one's child, or the needy and unfortunate.

In his fiction Hawthorne regularly employs the devices of symbolism and allegory, in which people and objects—the scarlet "A's," the child Pearl—stand for qualities or ideas beyond themselves. His books are set in the real world of Salem and surrounding New England, whether of earlier centuries or his own day, but like his ancestors, Hawthorne sees the supernatural at work throughout his world, and fills his fiction with mysterious and miraculous events.

RELATED READING


- The Oedipus trilogy (*Oedipus Rex*, *Antigone*, *Oedipus at Colonus*) by the Greek playwright Sophocles treats the themes of hidden guilt and atonement for wrongdoing.
- *The Winter's Tale*, by William Shakespeare, depicts both a husband's folly in condemning his wife for an imagined sin like Hester's and his redemption through his daughter.
- Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, which is dedicated to Hawthorne, tells of the sea captain Ahab, whose quest for the white whale, like Chillingworth's for Pearl's father, leads to destruction.
- *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, by Thomas Hardy, depicts a woman condemned by society and her husband for a youthful offense in which she unwillingly participated.

POSTREADING WRITING ACTIVITY

In a well-developed essay give your interpretation and evaluation of what Hawthorne means by this theme: "Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred." When you interpret, rely upon the text for support. When you evaluate, draw from personal experience and conviction.

THE SCARLET LETTER

Close Reading: Enrichment

 Your teacher will direct you on how to answer these.

1. Research American writers. Find out what you can about Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Henry David Thoreau, Emily Dickenson, etc. (Your teacher may provide you with other names.)
2. Look into the history of Salem. What you can discover about its importance in the history of New England?
3. Read Saki's "Open Window", O. Henry's "The Sire de Maletroit's Door", or Poe's "Cask of Amontillado". Write a brief analysis of one of these stories, noting how a particular thing has more importance or significance than being a mere material item.
4. Create a dialogue for Pearl and an imaginary playmate, revealing Pearl's thoughts and feelings.
5. In a dream, you become "The Scarlet Letter". You begin to speak a monologue revealing your innermost thoughts and feelings about your role in this novel. Present in writing or on tape your monologue.
6. Paint a picture in words or watercolour or some other medium (including music) of a locale that has special meaning for you, either positive or negative.
7. Write a free-verse poem about what sunshine means to you. Include literal and figurative or symbolic meanings.
8. Read "Tess of the d'Urbervilles", by Thomas Hardy and compare her position with Hester's.