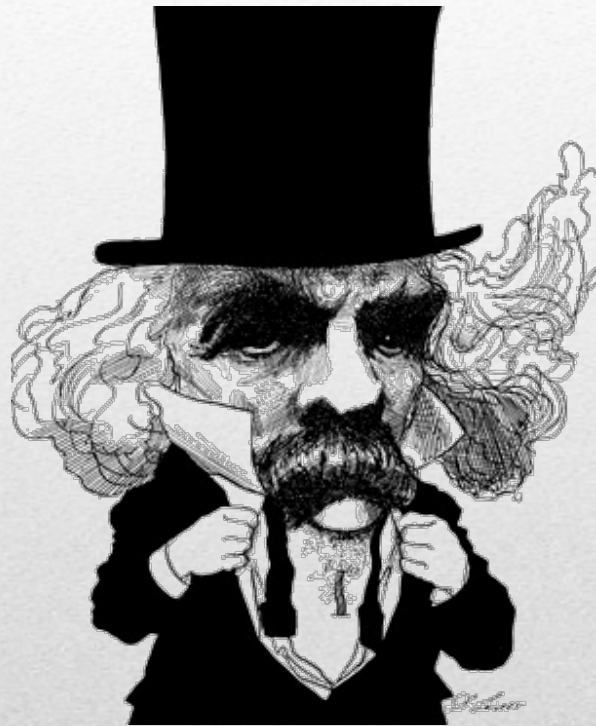




# **The Scarlet Letter**

By Nathaniel Hawthorne

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# Author

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- Born 1804 Salem, Massachusetts
  - Direct descendent of John Hathorne, the only judge involved in the Salem Witch Trials who never expressed regret
- Died 1864 Plymouth, New Hampshire
  - Buried in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery
- Part of a darker romantic movement, his themes often center on the inherent evil and sinfulness of humanity
  - Plots of psychological complexity that explore questions of guilt and hypocrisy
  - Characters who wrestle as much with internal conflict as with external conflict

- Published: 1850
- Genre: Romanticism
- Setting: Puritan Boston in the 1640s
- Protagonist: Hester Prynne
- Antagonist: Roger Chillingworth and Town
- Narrator: Unnamed Former Customs Surveyor
- Point-of-View: 3<sup>rd</sup> Person Omniscient

THE SCARLET LETTER



**Book**

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- Hester Prynne, having committed adultery and conceived a child out of wedlock, must wear a scarlet “A” to mark publically her shame.
- Her lover remains unidentified and tortured by guilt, while her husband, Roger Chillingworth, seeks revenge.
- Branded both by the scarlet letter and by her “illegitimate” daughter, Hester struggles to create a new life of repentance and dignity.

# Summary

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- The novel begins with a prelude (“The Custom House”) in which an unnamed narrator explains the book’s origin.
- While working at the Salem Custom House (a tax collection agency), he discovered in the attic a manuscript accompanied by a beautiful scarlet letter “A.” After losing his job, he decided to develop the story in the manuscript into a novel. *The Scarlet Letter* is that novel.
- This narrator, though 3<sup>rd</sup> person and omniscient, clearly favors Hester in his sympathies

## “Origin”

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- Renders a realistic world of recognizable geography and history, rich in mood and tone—a sense of place
- Heavy symbolism—imagery and characters
- Makes use of ambiguity and the supernatural in such a way as to obligate readers to interpret reality for themselves—how much is literal vs figurative?
- Vocabulary is expansive but precise
- Steers clear of slang, profanity, and ungrammatical expressions, which means he can feel more formal and less conversational than other authors—especially dialogue

# Style

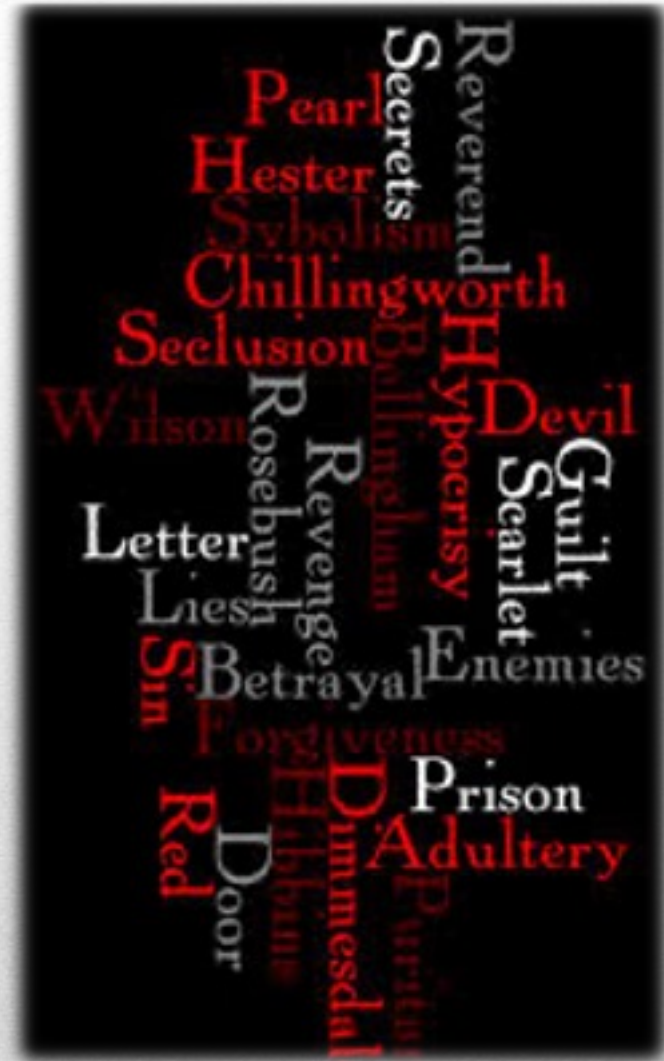
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- Sin
  - Private
- Shame
  - Public
- Human Suffering
  - Public vs. Private
- Power of Nature
- Power of Individual

# Themes

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- The Letter “A”
- Red and Black
- The Scaffold
- Night and Day
- The Forest
- The Brook
- The Rose Bush
- The Characters
  - Rev. Wilson
  - Gov. Bellingham
  - Mistress Hibbins



# Symbols and Motifs

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- Each of the four major characters represents a different expression of sin and its effect—physically, psychologically, and emotionally
  - Hester Prynne
  - Arthur Dimmesdale
  - Roger Chillingworth
  - Pearl

SIN

# Characters as Symbols

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- This story is about the human heart: its darkness, its lightness, its weakness, its strength, its softness, its hardness, its coldness, its warmth, its limitations, its capacity—for change, for growth, for love



# What to Remember

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