

Nathaniel Hawthorne completed *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850. He introduces the novel with the following explanation of how he came to write the story:

❧ THE ❧ CUSTOM HOUSE



Introduction to The Scarlet Letter

For three years—from 1846 to 1849—I worked as a surveyor for the District of Salem, Massachusetts, where I lived. My office was in the Salem Custom House. On the second floor of the Custom House there was a large, unfinished room. The brickwork and bare rafters had never been plastered over and the floor was of rough boards. At one end of this room, with its cobwebs and its coating of dust, there were several barrels piled up. These contained bundles of old and long-forgotten official documents. Some

of these documents dated back two hundred years, to the 1640s.

One rainy day when I had nothing better to do, I went into that unfinished room and browsed around in the dusty papers, curious to see if I could learn anything about the history of the early colonial days.

Most of the papers contained dull information about sailing ships that had come to the port—what cargo they had carried, what tariffs they paid, and such. I was about to give up and go downstairs to look for something more interesting to do. But just then I happened to lay my hand on a small package, carefully wrapped up in a piece of ancient yellow parchment. Something about this package aroused my curiosity. I undid the faded red ribbon that tied up the package and discovered that it contained various private documents that were quite different from the dull official records I had been looking through.

But the object in the mysterious package that most drew my attention was a piece of fine red cloth. It was worn and faded. There were traces of gold embroidery that were now dull with age. But in spite of its present condition, even I could see that it had been made with great skill and artistry. As I carefully smoothed out this decaying scarlet rag, it took on the shape of a letter. It was the capital letter A. It was obviously some sort of decoration to be worn on the clothing, but who

had worn it and what had it signified? I saw little hope of solving this riddle. And yet it strangely interested me. I could not take my eyes off the once-beautiful object. Whose hand had created it? And for what purpose? I could not begin to guess.

As I pondered the meaning of it, I picked it up and held it against the front of my shirt. It seemed to me—and you will find this hard to believe—it seemed to me, then, that I experienced a strange sensation, not exactly physical, but almost as if I felt a burning heat. It was as if the letter were not made of red cloth but of red-hot iron! I shuddered and let it fall to the floor.

This scarlet letter had so captured my imagination that, up to this moment, I had ignored the small roll of dingy paper that it had been twisted around. I now opened the roll and discovered it contained a reasonably complete explanation of the mysterious red letter.

The letter had been worn by a woman named Hester Prynne. Hester had lived in the Massachusetts colony from 1640 until her death in the late 1690s. In her later years, she had acted as a kind of voluntary nurse for the inhabitants of the area. She apparently had helped those who were ill or in need and she also gave advice, especially in matters of love. Many people thought of her as an angel of mercy, but others found her an intrusive nuisance. The papers also contained

some facts about her sufferings in her younger years. Those facts I have put together in the narrative that follows. I have invented some of the details. However, the main facts of the story are just as they appeared in the handwritten document I found in that dusty second floor room.

The more I thought about it, the more fascinated I became with Hester Prynne's story. I was especially haunted by it when I sat alone in my parlor late at night. Illuminated only by the glimmer of the coal-fire and the white light of the moon shining through the window, the objects in the room around me seemed transformed. In this mysterious light, they were no longer the familiar sofa, the table, the bookcase. No, they became invested with a quality of strangeness and remoteness. The light and the stillness of the late hour transformed the usually familiar room into a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and the world of phantoms, a place where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet. These two worlds—the Actual and the Imaginary—seemed to saturate one another. Each infused the other with its qualities. It became a place where ghosts might enter without frightening us.

It was at such times in my parlor, transformed by the light, by the silence, by the solitude, that I was able to imagine the details that lay behind the facts of Hester Prynne's story.



CHAPTER 1

The Prison Door

A crowd waited in front of the small wooden building. The bearded men were dressed in sad-colored clothing and wore tall gray hats. The women, some wearing hoods, and others bare-headed, wore dresses of somber colors covered by equally drab cloaks.

These Puritans included some of the original founders of the town of Boston. When they had first come here, twelve years earlier, they had arrived in the wilderness of the New World with dreams of creating a perfect society, a Utopia. But their hopes of a perfect place to live were quickly crushed by harsh reality. Shortly after they arrived, it became necessary to set aside one piece of land for a cemetery and another as a site for a prison.

And so, only a dozen years after the settlement of the town, the wooden jail was already marked with weather stains. These and other signs of age gave the dreary building a darkly threatening appearance. The door was massively timbered with oak and studded with iron spikes. The rust on the heavy, dull ironwork looked more ancient than anything else in the New World. In front of the building was a patch of grass, overgrown with straggling weeds. It was as if these ugly weeds had found something agreeable in this soil—the same soil from which sprang that black flower of civilized society, a prison.

But, on one side of the dark and gloomy door, was a wild rosebush. This June day it was covered with delicate red blooms. One could imagine these blossoms offering their fragrance and fragile beauty to the condemned criminal as he came forth from the prison to meet his doom. It was as if the deep heart of Nature could pity him and be kind to him.