

*Nathaniel Hawthorne 1804-1864.*

## *A Note on Nathaniel Hawthorne*

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born on July 4, 1804, in Salem, Massachusetts, to an established New England family.

His ancestors took part in the Salem witch trials and the Quaker persecution. William Hathorne (Hawthorne added the "w"), who arrived in the New World in 1630, was the judge who sentenced a Quaker woman to be whipped through the streets of Boston. His son, also a judge, presided over the notorious Salem witch trials in 1692. A woman he condemned to death during the witch trials put a curse<sup>1</sup> on the Hawthorne family. There is no evidence that the curse had any effect on his family. However, Nathaniel Hawthorne was aware of this curse, and it came up in his writing.

His ancestry explains, in part, his interest in the Puritans, and in the concepts of sin, punishment and evil.

1. **curse** : malediction; a word or sentence asking God, or a spirit to bring evil or harm to someone.

Hawthorne decided to become a writer while at Bowdoin College in Maine. One of his classmates was Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who later became a famous American poet.

For over a decade after graduation, he studied the Puritans and their history. In 1828, he published his first anonymous novel, *Fanshawe*, which was not a success. In later life, he never mentioned this work. In 1837, he published an excellent collection of short stories, *Twice-Told Tales*.

He married Sophia Peabody in 1842, and they had three children. In 1846, he published another successful collection of short stories, *Mosses from an Old Manse*.

After leaving his employment at the Salem Customhouse in 1849, he began writing *The Scarlet Letter*, his masterpiece, which was published in 1850.

After *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne published *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) and *The Blithedale Romance* (1852). *The House of the Seven Gables* tells about a family that lives under a curse of a man condemned to death for witchcraft.

Following the election of Franklin Pierce as President of the United States in 1853, Hawthorne was appointed U.S. Consul in Liverpool and Manchester, England. After leaving this post, he travelled through Europe with his family, and lived in Italy for two years. There he wrote his last novel, *The Marble Faun* which was published in 1860 when he and his family returned to the United States.

He died away from home, on May 19th, 1864, while on a brief vacation with his friend, Franklin Pierce. He left several unfinished works.





*Boston in 1833 – During Hawthorne's time.*



# Hawthorne and “The Scarlet Letter”

In 1976, a family living in Colorado discovered an old notebook among some papers. The notebook was kept between 1835 and 1841, by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Like any writer's notebook, it was a collection of words, fragments of sentences and ideas. It was the notebook where Hawthorne had jotted down <sup>1</sup> the first thoughts for his future masterpiece, *The Scarlet Letter*.

In 1838, eleven years before he began writing the novel, he had already created sketches of some of his characters. In his notes, he wrote about “spiritual diseases and diseases of the body”, and about “a sin that could cause a sore <sup>2</sup> to appear on the body”. The novel was taking shape in his mind. At a later date, he decided to tell the story of a woman condemned to wear the letter “A” as a sign of her adultery.

Was *The Scarlet Letter* a true story? In “The Custom House”, Hawthorne's introductory writing to *The Scarlet Letter*, he wrote that while working at the Custom House in Salem, he found a mysterious package.

Inside the package he found a fine red cloth, which was worn <sup>3</sup> and faded. There were traces of gold embroidery <sup>4</sup> on it. After examining it carefully, he noticed that it was a capital letter “A”. Each leg of the A measured exactly 3 3/4 inches (about 6 cm) in length.

There were also several sheets of faded paper in the mysterious

1. **jotted down** : written down quickly.
2. **sore** : painful, infected place on the body.
3. **worn** : damaged or thin because it is old.
4. **embroidery** [ɪmbrɔɪdəri] : ornamental needlework on cloth, dress.



package. They had been written long ago by Surveyor Pue, who knew the tragic story of the scarlet letter and its owner.

After further investigation, Hawthorne was able to gather more information regarding the life and sufferings of the woman who was condemned to wear the scarlet letter. The story took place in the Puritan settlement of Boston, between 1642 and 1649.

Finally in 1850, *The Scarlet Letter* was published and was immediately recognized as a classic destined to fame. It has constantly remained in print, ever since its first publication.

The fact that *The Scarlet Letter* involves universal themes such as love, sex, sin, evil, punishment, rebellion, hypocrisy, revenge and hate makes it a novel that cannot be forgotten by any generation.



*Boston in 1850, when Hawthorne published The Scarlet Letter.*



**1** Are these sentences true (T) or false (F)? Correct the false ones.

- |  | T                        | F                        |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| a. A family living in Colorado discovered an old notebook with the story of <i>The Scarlet Letter</i> .                              | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| b. Eleven years before Hawthorne began writing <i>The Scarlet Letter</i> , he had already created some of the characters.            | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| c. While working at the Custom House in Salem, he found a mysterious notebook.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| d. The old, faded red cloth with gold embroidery was a capital letter "A".   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| e. Surveyor Pue was the original author of <i>The Scarlet Letter</i> .   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| f. The story is about a woman who is condemned to wear the scarlet letter in the Puritan settlement of Salem, between 1624 and 1649. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| g. The novel, which was published in 1850, was immediately recognized as a classic, and has constantly remained in print.            | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

## Before reading

- 1** The concepts of love, sex, sin, evil, punishment, rebellion, hypocrisy, revenge and hate are the underlying themes of *The Scarlet Letter*. How much do you know about them?

Choose the correct definition from the notebook and write it in the table. Then tick the correct box to indicate how often teenagers are involved with that feeling or action.

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1. harm, badness, wickedness                        | 6. strong feeling of fondness or attraction                          |
| 2. harm done to someone in return for harm received | 7. imposed suffering for a fault or crime                            |
| 3. strong feeling of dislike, hostility             | 8. disobedience to God, or to religion                               |
| 4. disobedience to authority                        | 9. saying one thing and doing or thinking another, having two faces. |
| 5. physical intimacy                                |  |



Definition	Never	Sometimes	Often
a. Love: .....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. Sex: .....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c. Sin: .....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d. Evil: .....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e. Punishment: .....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
f. Rebellion: .....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
g. Hypocrisy: .....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
h. Revenge: .....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
i. Hate: .....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



**2** What other novels have you read that involve one or more of the themes in question 1?

.....

.....

  Listen to Chapter 1 and then choose the correct answer.

1. The founders of the colony set aside a portion of land for a prison and a cemetery because
  - ☐ they had orders to do so
  - ☐ they were optimists
  - ☐ they knew there would be crime and death
2. How old was the settlement?
  - ☐ about 15 or 20 years old
  - ☐ older than any other one in the New World
  - ☐ in June it was one year old
3. The wooden prison looked very old because
  - ☐ the door was black
  - ☐ the oak door was broken
  - ☐ there was rust on the door
4. The prison was seen as
  - ☐ the oldest building in town
  - ☐ the black flower of society
  - ☐ an ugly weed
5. The wild rose bush offered its beauty to
  - ☐ prisoners and condemned criminals
  - ☐ people who are frail
  - ☐ the readers of the story

Now read the text and check your answers.



# A C T I V I T I E S



*Boston in 1640, at the time of The Scarlet Letter.*





## CHAPTER ONE

# The Prison Door



A group of bearded men, in sad-coloured clothes and grey steeple-crowned <sup>1</sup> hats, stood in front of a wooden building. Beside them stood a group of women, some wearing hoods. The heavy door of the building was made of oak, <sup>2</sup> covered with iron spikes. <sup>3</sup>

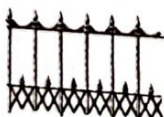
The founders of a new colony, no matter how optimistic they were, always set aside a portion of land for a cemetery, and another portion for a prison. They probably built the first prison near Cornhill and the first burial ground on Isaac Johnson's land. It was around Johnson's grave that the old churchyard of King's Chapel grew.

1. steeple-crowned hats :



2. oak : a type of wood.

3. spikes :



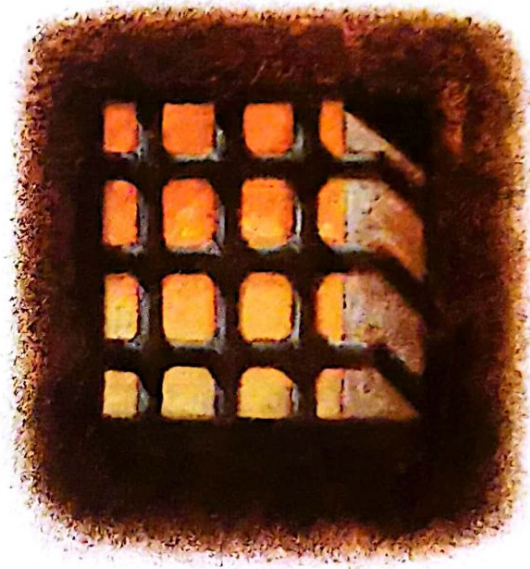


# The Prison Door

Fifteen or twenty years after the settlement of the town, the wooden prison was already weatherbeaten <sup>1</sup> and showed the evident signs of age. The rust on the iron-work of the oak door made it look older than anything else in the New World.

In front of this sinister building was a plot <sup>2</sup> of grass, covered with ugly weeds. <sup>3</sup> Evidently, there was something congenial in the soil outside a prison—the black flower of civilized society—something that encouraged ugly weeds to grow.

But on one side of the entrance, there was a wild rose bush. In the month of June, it was covered with delicate, fragrant roses. They offered their fragrance and beauty to the prisoner who entered the gloomy building, and to the condemned criminal who left it to meet his doom. <sup>4</sup>



Let us pick one of its flowers and give it to the reader.

Hopefully, this sweet flower will serve to soften the dark tones of a tale of human frailty <sup>5</sup> and sorrow.



1. **weatherbeaten** : damaged by the weather.
2. **plot** : small, marked piece of ground.
3. **weeds** : unwanted wild plants or grass.
4. **doom** : terrible fate, unavoidable death.
5. **frailty** : weakness.



1

2

Nouns	Adjectives
<i>cemetery</i>	<i>sad-coloured</i>

3

4



## Themes for thought, discussion and writing

**5** Is black considered a colour of death, evil or sorrow in all societies?

**6** Is white ever considered a colour of death? If so, where?

**7** Society often attributes colours to certain emotions, events or political tendencies. What do you attribute to these colours?

a. red : .....

b. pink : .....

c. green : .....

d. yellow : .....

e. purple : .....

f. black : .....

g. white : .....

h. blue : .....