CHRISTIAN GUIDES TO THE CLASSICS

HAWTHORNE'S

THE SCARLET LETTER

LELAND RYKEN

Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter"

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Contents

The Nature and Function of Literature

We need to approach any piece of writing with the right expectations, based on the kind of writing that it is. The expectations that we should bring to any work of literature are the following.

The subject of literature. The subject of literature is human experience, rendered as concretely as possible. Literature should thus be contrasted to expository writing of the type we use to conduct the ordinary business of life. Literature does not aim to impart facts and information. It exists to make us share a series of experiences. Literature appeals to our image-making and image-perceiving capacity. A famous novelist said that his purpose was to make his readers *see*, by which he meant to see life.

The universality of literature. To take that one step further, the subject of literature is *universal* human experience—what is true for all people at all times in all places. This does not contradict the fact that literature is first of all filled with concrete particulars. The particulars of literature are a net whereby the author captures and expresses the universal. History and the daily news tell us what *happened*; literature tells us what *happens*. The task that this imposes on us is to recognize and name the familiar experiences that we vicariously live as we read a work of literature. The truth that literature imparts is truthfulness to life—knowledge in the form of seeing things accurately. As readers we not only look *at* the world of the text but *through* it to everyday life.

An interpretation of life. In addition to portraying human experiences, authors give us their interpretation of those experiences. There is a persuasive aspect to literature, as authors attempt to get us to share their views of life. These interpretations of life can be phrased as ideas or themes. An important part of assimilating imaginative literature is thus determining and evaluating an author's angle of vision and belief system.

The importance of literary form. A further aspect of literature arises from the fact that authors are artists. They write in distinctly literary genres such as narrative and poetry. Additionally, literary authors want us to share their love of technique and beauty, all the way from skill with words to an ability to structure a work carefully and artistically.

Summary. A work of imaginative literature aims to make us see life accurately, to get us to think about important ideas, and to enjoy an artistic performance.

Why the Classics Matter

This book belongs to a series of guides to the literary classics of Western literature. We live at a time when the concept of a literary classic is often misunderstood and when the classics themselves are often undervalued or even attacked. The very concept of a classic will rise in our estimation if we simply understand what it is.

What is a classic? To begin, the term *classic* implies the best in its class. The first hurdle that a classic needs to pass is excellence. Excellent according to whom? This brings us to a second part of our definition: classics have stood the test of time through the centuries. The human race itself determines what works rise to the status of classics. That needs to be qualified slightly: the classics are especially known and valued by people who have received a formal education, alerting us that the classics form an important part of the education that takes place within a culture.

This leads us to yet another aspect of classics: classics are known to us not only in themselves but also in terms of their interpretation and reinterpretation through the ages. We know a classic partly in terms of the attitudes and interpretations that have become attached to it through the centuries.

Why read the classics? The first good reason to read the classics is that they represent the best. The fact that they are difficult to read is a mark in their favor; within certain limits, of course, works of literature that demand a lot from us will always yield more than works that demand little of us. If we have a taste for what is excellent, we will automatically want some contact with classics. They offer more enjoyment, more understanding about human experience, and more richness of ideas and thought than lesser works (which we can also legitimately read). We finish reading or rereading a classic with a sense of having risen higher than we would otherwise have risen.

Additionally, to know the classics is to know the past, and with that knowledge comes a type of power and mastery. If we know the past, we are in some measure protected from the limitations that come when all we know is the contemporary. Finally, to know the classics is to be an educated person. Not to know them is, intellectually and culturally speaking, like walking around without an arm or leg.

Summary. Here are four definitions of a literary classic from literary experts; each one provides an angle on why the classics matter. (1) The best that has been thought and said (Matthew Arnold). (2) "A literary classic ranks with the best of its kind that have been produced" (*Harper Handbook to Literature*). (3) A classic "lays its images permanently on the mind [and] is entirely irreplaceable in the sense that no other book whatever comes anywhere near reminding you of it or being even a momentary substitute for it" (C. S. Lewis). (4) Classics are works to which "we return time and again in our minds, even if we do not reread them frequently, as touchstones by which we interpret the world around us" (Nina Baym).

How to Read a Story

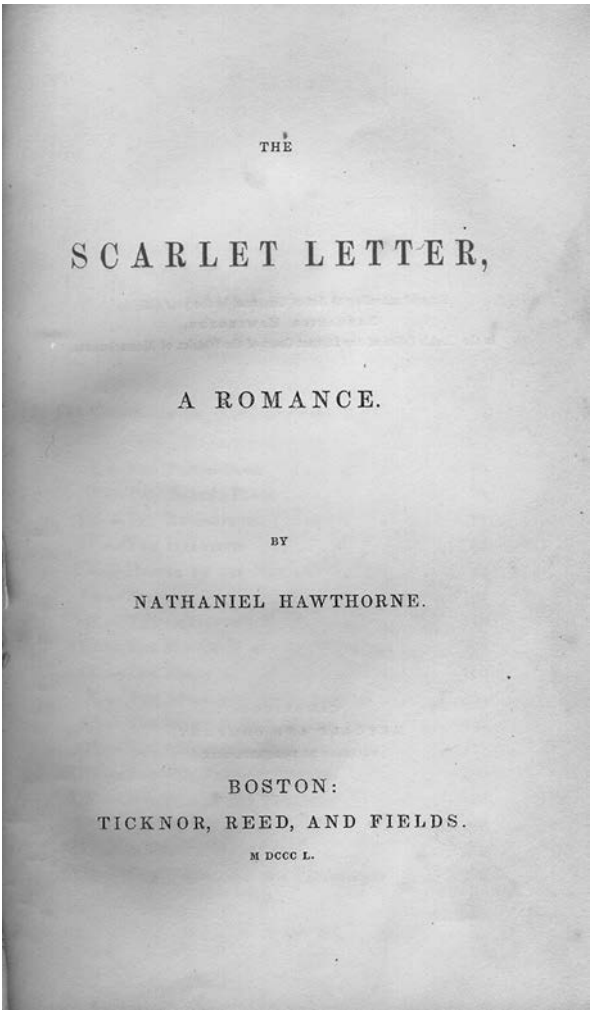
The Scarlet Letter, like the other classics discussed in this series, is a narrative or story. To read it with enjoyment and understanding, we need to know how stories work and why people write and read them.

Why do people tell and read stories? To tell a story is to (a) entertain and (b) make a statement. As for the entertainment value of stories, it is a fact that one of the most universal human impulses can be summed up in the four words *tell me a story*. The appeal of stories is universal, and all of us are incessant storytellers during the course of a typical day. As for *making a statement*, a novelist hit the nail on the head when he said that in order for storytellers to tell a story they must have some picture of the world and of what is right and wrong in that world.

The things that make up a story. All stories are comprised of three things that claim our attention—setting, character, and plot. A good story is a balance among these three. In one sense, storytellers tell us *about* these things, but in another sense, as fiction writer Flannery O'Connor put it, storytellers don't speak *about* plot, setting, and character but *with* them. *About what* does the storyteller tell us by means of these things? About life, human experience, and the ideas that the storyteller believes to be true.

World making as part of storytelling. To read a story is to enter a whole world of the imagination. Storytellers construct their narrative world carefully. World making is a central part of the storyteller's enterprise. On the one hand, this is part of what makes stories entertaining. We love to be transported from mundane reality to faraway places with strange-sounding names. But storytellers also intend their imagined worlds as accurate pictures of reality. In other words, it is an important part of the truth claims that they intend to make. Accordingly, we need to pay attention to the details of the world that a storyteller creates, viewing that world as a picture of what the author believes to exist.

The need to be discerning. The first demand that a story makes on us is surrender—surrender to the delights of being transported, of encountering experiences, characters, and settings, of considering the truth claims that an author makes by means of his or her story. But we must not be morally and intellectually passive in the face of what an author puts before us. We need to be true to our own convictions as we weigh the morality and truth claims of a story. A story's greatness does not guarantee that it tells the truth in every way.


THE

SCARLET LETTER,

A ROMANCE.

BY

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE.

BOSTON:
TICKNOR, REED, AND FIELDS.
M DCCC L.

Original title page

The Scarlet Letter: The Book at a Glance

Author. Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864)

Nationality. American

Date of first publication. 1850

Approximate number of pages. 250

Available editions. Probably no work of American literature is more widely available than this work; paperback editions include those by Bantam, Dover Thrift, Norton, Penguin, and Random House.

Genres. Romance novel (with the adjective *romance* here meaning that elements of the supernatural or marvelous are mingled with the prevailing realism of the story); historical fiction

Setting for the story. Boston in Puritan times (mid-seventeenth century)

Main characters. Arthur Dimmesdale, the Puritan minister of the town; Hester Prynne, a married woman with whom Dimmesdale produced an illegitimate daughter named Pearl, also a leading character; Roger Chillingworth, husband of Hester who arrives belatedly in the town and seeks to destroy Dimmesdale as an act of revenge; the Puritan community as a group. No one of these dominates the story more than the others, but inasmuch as Dimmesdale's salvation on the scaffold resolves the action, by the story's end he has emerged as the protagonist.

Story line. The story opens with the public exposure of Hester Prynne, holding an infant daughter whose father she refuses to identify. In punishment, she is ostracized by the Puritan community and forced to wear a scarlet letter A on her bosom. The father of the girl is the town minister, Arthur Dimmesdale, who is too weak-willed to shoulder his share of responsibility for the sin of adultery. Eventually Hester's husband, Roger Chillingworth, arrives in Boston and takes up residence with Dimmesdale. He inflames Dimmesdale's sense of guilt, and Dimmesdale undergoes a long physical and mental decline. In the climax of the story, Dimmesdale, on the verge of death, mounts the scaffold and confesses his sin, experiencing God's forgiveness as he does so.

Five misconceptions about *The Scarlet Letter*. (1) *Hawthorne paints a historically accurate picture of the New England Puritans.* Hawthorne's portrayal of the Puritans is part of his satiric design, and writers of satire exaggerate to make their points. Hawthorne's Puritans have little in common with the original Puritans of Old and New England, and nothing in common with the picture of the Puritans that emerges from their

own writings. (2) *The fact that Hawthorne portrays the Puritans negatively demonstrates his rejection of Christianity in this book*. We need to make a distinction between the behavior of the Puritan community and their doctrine. The book ultimately affirms Christian and Puritan *doctrine*, while exposing the *behavior* of the religious community portrayed in the story. (3) *This is a completely gloomy book*. The spectacle of sin and guilt is, indeed, a sad one, but the story moves toward a celebration of Christian salvation, and the characters win other victories along the way. (4) *Hawthorne really did run across a scarlet letter A while working in the local customhouse*. The account that the narrator of *The Scarlet Letter* gives in the preface, entitled "The Custom-House," of finding a scarlet letter is as fictional as the story that follows. Hawthorne never found such a letter. (5) *The story is primarily about adultery*. It isn't. The word *adultery* does not even appear in the book. The adultery is a past event when the story begins. The focus is on the consequences of that past event. No adulterous passions or experiences are portrayed in the book. The story is not about adultery but about concealment of sin and the guilt it produces. It is also about *consciousness* of sin and guilt.

Cultural context. Hawthorne was a mid-nineteenth-century author. The dominant world view in the first half of that century was Romanticism, which elevated nature, feeling, freedom from restraints, and the autonomy of the individual to a position of primacy. Hester represents the Romantic worldview. The Christian worldview existed side by side with the Romantic. The central thematic conflict in *The Scarlet Letter* is the conflict between Romantic and Christian worldviews. We should note in passing that the book adds a third worldview to the mix—Puritan legalism, which elevates law and the moral code to the highest value.

Reception history. *The Scarlet Letter* is probably the signature book of American literature. Certainly no work of American literature is more famous. The book has been a cultural icon from the time of its first publication, when it was an instant best seller.

Tips for reading. (1) Settle down for a leisurely read. Hawthorne covers a relatively small amount of action, but what he does include is described in full detail. (2) Instead of reading for action, therefore, we need to relish characterization, relationships, settings, and interior psychological action (what is happening inside the minds of characters). (3) We need to keep revising our understandings and assessments of characters and worldviews. Through most of the story we would never guess that Dimmesdale and the Christian worldview that he represents would eclipse Hester and Romanticism as the view that Hawthorne endorsed. (4) A lot of what the book expresses about human experience is embodied in symbols.

The Author and His Faith

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864) was born into a long-established New England family whose names dot the pages of American colonial history. An ancestor had been a judge at the Salem witchcraft trials, and Hawthorne spent a lifetime distancing himself from certain aspects of his Puritan heritage. Hawthorne was not part of the institutional or churchgoing scene in his day. When we speak in this guide of his faith, it is not a comment on his state of soul but on his belief system and (even more) the religious viewpoint embodied in his fiction.

The religious context. Two intellectual/religious systems of belief were candidates for Hawthorne's allegiance. One was Transcendentalism, the American version of Romanticism. Hawthorne dabbled with it (even living briefly at a Transcendental commune called Brook Farm), but he did not share the optimism about human nature that Transcendentalism embraced. So he was left with Christianity as the belief system within which he operated. We can say unequivocally that Hawthorne was a theist with thorough familiarity with the Bible and Christian doctrine.

Hawthorne's religion. Hawthorne's notebooks are filled with references to God, leading a literary critic to say that Hawthorne was "innately religious" and "more than any other writer of his time . . . a God-centered writer" (Joseph Schwartz). His acquaintance with the Bible and reliance on it in his fiction were so thorough that his editor and publisher claimed that when he questioned Hawthorne about his use of a word, Hawthorne would almost always refer him to the Bible as his authority (James T. Fields). Selected Hawthorne scholars claim the following: as a writer Hawthorne was "freely at home in the Hebraic-Christian tradition" (Amos Wilder); Hawthorne's theology was a "nameless and indisputatious" Calvinism or Puritanism, "arrived at by experience and insight" (Austin Warren); Hawthorne is a Protestant writer whose novel *The Scarlet Letter* is the nearest American equivalent to the Catholic novels of the French writer Francois Mauriac (Louis O. Rubin Jr.).

Religion in *The Scarlet Letter*. Any reader of Hawthorne's best-known story can see at a glance that the entire frame of reference is Christian. The religious life of characters in the story revolves around practices like churchgoing, sermons, sin, confession, and catechism. Biblical allusions abound. Christian doctrines such as morality, sin, guilt, heaven, hell, and confession are the assumed frame of reference on virtually every page. It is indisputable that Hawthorne (a) knew Christianity well and (b) incorporated it into his fiction. The degree to which *The Scarlet Letter* moves beyond acquaintance to affirmation will be apparent in the commentary that follows.

CHAPTER 1

The Prison-Door

Plot Summary

The two-page opening chapter whisks us away to an imagined world that on the surface is remote from our own time and place. The story begins with a crowd scene, and the brief description of the men's steeple-crowned hats and the women's hoods is our first clue that we have stepped into seventeenth-century Puritan Boston.

The focus of the chapter is not on the crowd, however, but rather the place where the early action of the story will occur. The crowd has assembled in front of the town prison. The prison is only the launching pad, as the narrator immediately takes a wide-angle view and names the ingredients that made up any typical village in Puritan New England—a church, a surrounding cemetery, and a prison. Then, in a surprise maneuver, Hawthorne gives the most space of all to a wild rosebush beside the prison. It is hard to imagine a simpler introduction to the complex story that will follow.

The opening sentences of any story are one of the biggest challenges facing a storyteller. All storytellers need an irresistible hook that will entice a reader to keep reading. Hawthorne reached into the available bag of tricks and cast his lot with description of place or setting as the thing that would draw his readers into the story.

Whenever we read or listen to a story, we enter a whole world of the imagination. We enter that unfamiliar world much as we enter a real-life place that we are visiting for the first time. Gradually we become familiar with the details and assumptions of the imagined world of the story. A literary critic once remarked that the world of prison, cemetery, and church that we meet at the outset of *The Scarlet Letter* epitomizes the Puritan drama of sin, death, and salvation.

Commentary

The simple portal through which we enter Hawthorne's masterpiece is a carefully orchestrated introduction to the book as a whole. While seeming merely to describe a physical setting, Hawthorne actually establishes his famous technique of symbolic reality. The prison, the church, the graveyard, and the rosebush are literal properties of the scene, but each one functions as a symbol of an important aspect of Hawthorne's imagined

world. The prison symbolizes the evil that is part of human nature and society. The church represents salvation as Christians experience it. The cemetery symbolizes death, and the rosebush embodies the principle of nature and natural feeling or emotion.

Hawthorne's use of symbolism extends to characters' names. Hester is a version of Esther, an Old Testament heroine noted for her beauty, strength, and courage.

While the technique of symbolic reality is something that any careful reader can see by looking closely at the text, another technique is one that we do not fully realize until the end of the story. It is the technique of the guilty reader. Hawthorne uses evaluative terms that on a first reading evoke a negative picture of society and Puritanism and a positive picture of natural sentiment (as symbolized by the rosebush). This might mislead us into thinking that the book is an attack on Christianity. But as the story unfolds it becomes clear that the book itself accepts evil and its punishment as inevitable aspects of human existence, not something foisted on it by Christianity.

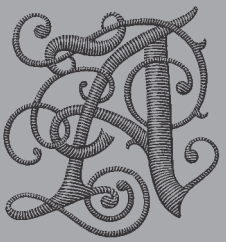
The Scarlet Letter sets the Christian and Romantic worldviews into conflict and lets them fight it out until the end of the story. The Romantic worldview elevates feeling and nature to the highest value and disparages human civilization or society as being confining to the human spirit. It is part of Hawthorne's technique of the guilty reader initially to get us to feel sympathetically toward the Romantic elevation of nature and feeling.

Despite the opening portrayal of society as rigid and nature as warm and sympathetic, it is important not to foreclose on which worldview Hawthorne ultimately favors. *The Scarlet Letter* is built around a surprise ending that reverses our opening impressions.

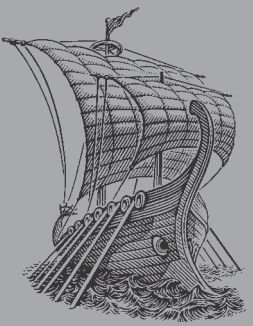
For Reflection or Discussion

A good preliminary question to ask of any episode in a story is, What draws me into the action? What evokes my interest? Secondly, Hawthorne uses heavily evaluative terms as he describes the details that he puts before us, and these function as a lens through which we look at such phenomena as the prison and the rosebush. This prompts us to ask, How does Hawthorne initially get us to view such dichotomies as civilization and nature, society and the individual, Christianity and Romanticisim? What specific things characterize the two halves of these dichotomies?

ENCOUNTER THE CLASSICS
WITH A LITERARY EXPERT



HAWTHORNE'S
THE SCARLET LETTER



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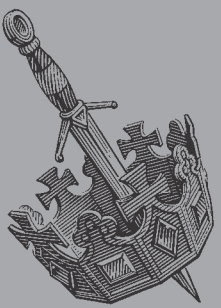

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- Evaluates the classic text from a Christian worldview

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LELAND RYKEN (PhD, University of Oregon) served as professor of English at Wheaton College for over 45 years and has authored or edited nearly 40 books.

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