

“The Scarlet Letter” by Nathaniel Hawthorne

[B2]

In questo capolavoro della letteratura romantica, l'autore del Massachusetts esplora i temi della sessualità, del peccato e della falsa morale puritana delle prime colonie americane del XVII secolo.



Nathaniel Hawthorne, a contemporary of Edgar Allan Poe, was an American novelist and short story writer in the dark romantic tradition. Born in Salem, Massachusetts in 1804, his ancestors had been influential members of the Puritan movement. Hawthorne used his family history to explore themes of morality, [guilt](#) and [sin](#) in his fiction. He'd [achieved](#) critical acclaim, but little financial success, until the publication of *The Scarlet Letter*.

PRISON

The novel explores the self-destructive power of love, and the judgement of others. The book is set in 17th-century Boston in a Puritan community into which young Hester Prynne is [released](#) from prison to begin a new life. First, however, she must stand in the marketplace and face the [townsfolk](#). In her arms she holds a small child, and the letter 'A' is prominently [sewn](#) onto her

dress. "On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter A. It was so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel which she wore..." "Sul petto del vestito, in fine stoffa rossa, contornata da elaborati ricami e fantasiosi ghirigori di filo dorato, figurava la lettera A. Aveva un aspetto tanto artistico, ed era stata eseguita con tale esuberanza e magnificente fantasia, da sembrare una perfetta rifinitura dell'abito che portava".

'A' FOR ADULTERY

The 'A' stands for her crime, that of adultery. While her husband was at sea, presumed dead, Hester became pregnant. The 'A' is considered a "scarlet letter", and in a community governed by strict religious rules, it means that Hester and her daughter, Pearl, must now live as outcasts. Hester, however, believes that her actions were born of true love. She refuses to name the man who was her fellow sinner, even when asked to do so by the town's popular young clergyman, Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale. "«I charge thee to speak out the name of thy fellow-sinner and fellow-sufferer! Be not silent from any mistaken pity and tenderness for him; for, believe me, Hester, though he were to step down from a high place, and stand there beside thee, on thy pedestal of shame, yet better it were so, than to hide a guilty heart through life.»" "«[...] vi intimo di dire il nome del vostro compagno di peccati e sofferenze! Non dovete tacere per una qualche falsa pietà, o per sentimenti amorevoli nei suoi confronti, perché, credetemi, Hester, anche dovesse egli lasciare una posizione di potere per stare con voi sul palco dell'infamia, sarebbe comunque meglio che tener nascosto il suo cuore colpevole a vita»".

WARNING

An older man watches Hester at the marketplace. When he later approaches her, she recognises the husband she believed to be lost at sea. He married her for her beauty and intelligence, but she never loved him. Now he demands the name of her lover, and delivers a warning. "«Believe me, Hester,

there are few things, — whether in the outward world, or, to a certain depth, in the invisible sphere of thought, — few things hidden from the man, who devotes himself earnestly and unreservedly to the solution of a mystery.»”

“«Credi a me, Hester, ci son poche cose, nel mondo esterno, o fino a una certa profondità nella sfera invisibile del pensiero, poche cose celate a colui che si dedichi sinceramente e senza riserve alla soluzione di un mistero»”.

OBSESSION

Hester’s husband becomes obsessed with discovering the identity of the man who loves his wife and is the father of Pearl. He teams up with Reverend Dimmesdale, who appears troubled and unwell. Tragedy seems inevitable. Can Hester escape Boston for Europe? Will the identity of her lover be revealed? The situation inevitably affects young Pearl, who seems older than her years when she answers Hester’s question about the ‘A’ on her mother’s dress: “«Dost thy know, child, wherefore thy mother wears this letter?» «Truly I do!» answered Pearl, looking brightly into her mother’s face. «It is for the same reason that the minister keeps his hand over his heart!»”

“«Sai, piccola, perché tua madre porta questa lettera?» «Certo che sì!», rispose Pearl, guardando in volto la madre tutta vivace. «Per lo stesso motivo per cui il pastore si tiene la mano sul cuore!»”

INSIGHT

A moral mystery, The Scarlet Letter quickly became a bestseller. Buoyed by his success, Hawthorne wrote three more novels before his death in 1864. His direct prose, dark symbolism and psychological insight influenced many future American writers, including Herman Melville, Henry James and William Faulkner. There have been several film adaptations of The Scarlet Letter, including a 1995 movie starring Demi Moore and Gary Oldman, and directed by Roland Joffé. The 2010 romantic comedy film Easy A, set in an American high school and starring Emma Stone, is loosely based on Hawthorne’s novel.

Glossary

- **achieved** = ottenere
- **teams up** = collaborare
- **troubled** = preoccupato
- **guilt** = colpa
- **sin** = peccato
- **insight** = intuizione
- **outcasts** = emarginato
- **Buoyed** = incoraggiare
- **loosely** = liberamente tratto da
- **townsfolk** = cittadini, vicini
- **presumed** = supporre
- **fellow** = compagno
- **released** = lasciare in libertà
- **sewn** = cucire