

The Scarlet Letter

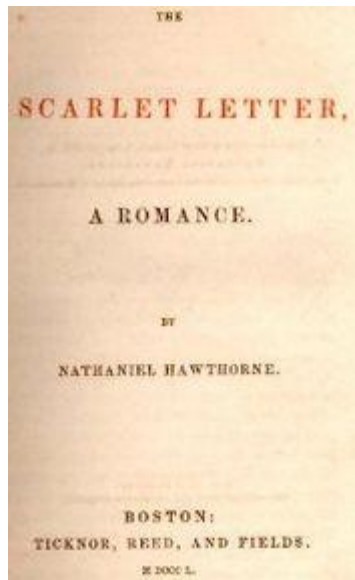
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Not to be confused with [The Scarlet Letters](#).

This article is about the novel. For the films, see [The Scarlet Letter \(film\)](#).

The Scarlet Letter



Title page, first edition, 1850

Author(s)	Nathaniel Hawthorne
Genre(s)	Romantic , Historical
Publisher	Ticknor, Reed & Fields
Publication date	1850
Pages	232

The Scarlet Letter is an 1850 romantic work of fiction in a historical setting, written by [Nathaniel Hawthorne](#). It is considered to be his [magnum opus](#).^[1] Set in 17th-century [Puritan Boston](#) during the years 1642 to 1649, it tells the story of [Hester Prynne](#), who conceives a daughter through an adulterous affair and struggles to create a new life of [repentance](#) and dignity. Throughout the book, Hawthorne explores themes of [legalism](#), sin, and guilt.

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[[edit](#)] Plot summary

The story starts during the summer of 1642, near [Boston, Massachusetts](#), in a [Puritan](#) village. A young woman, named Hester Prynne, has been led from the town [prison](#) with her infant daughter in her arms, and on the breast of her gown "a rag of [scarlet](#) cloth" that "assumed the shape of a letter." It is the uppercase letter "[A](#)." The Scarlet Letter "A" represents the act of adultery that she has committed and it is to be a symbol of her sin—a [badge of shame](#)—for all to see. A man, who is elderly and a stranger to the town, enters the crowd and asks another onlooker what's happening. The second man responds by explaining that Hester is being punished for adultery. Hester's husband, who is much older than she, and whose real name is unknown, has sent her ahead to America whilst settling affairs in Europe. However, her husband does not arrive in Boston and the [consensus](#) is that he has been lost at sea. It is apparent that, while waiting for her husband, Hester has had an affair, leading to the birth of her daughter. She will not reveal her lover's identity, however, and the scarlet letter, along with her subsequent [public shaming](#), is the punishment for her sin and secrecy. On this day, Hester is led to the town scaffold and harangued by the town fathers, but she again refuses to identify her child's father.^[2]

The elderly onlooker is Hester's missing husband, who is now practicing medicine and calling himself [Roger Chillingworth](#). He reveals his true identity to Hester and medicates her daughter. They have a frank discussion where Chillingworth states that it was foolish and wrong for a cold, old intellectual like him to marry a young lively woman like Hester. He expressly states that he thinks that they have wronged each other and that he is even with her — her lover is a completely different matter. Hester refuses to divulge the name of her lover and Chillingworth does not press her stating that he will find out anyway. He does elicit a promise from her to keep his true identity as Hester's husband secret, though. He settles in Boston to practice medicine there. Several years pass. Hester supports herself by working as a seamstress, and her daughter, Pearl, grows into a willful, impish child, and is said to be the scarlet letter come to life as both Hester's love and her punishment. Shunned by the community, they live in a small cottage on the outskirts of Boston. Community officials attempt to take Pearl away from Hester, but with the help of [Arthur Dimmesdale](#), an eloquent minister, the mother and daughter manage to stay together. Dimmesdale, however, appears to be wasting away and suffers from mysterious heart trouble, seemingly caused by psychological distress. Chillingworth attaches himself to the ailing minister and eventually moves in with him so that he can provide his patient with round-the-clock care. Chillingworth also suspects that there may be a connection between the minister's torments and Hester's secret, and he begins to test Dimmesdale to see what he can learn. One afternoon, while the

minister sleeps, Chillingworth discovers something undescribed to the reader, supposedly an "A" burned into Dimmesdale's chest, which convinces him that his suspicions are correct.^[2]



 *The Scarlet Letter*. Painting by [T. H. Matteson](#). This 1860 oil-on-canvas may have been made with Hawthorne's advice.^[2]

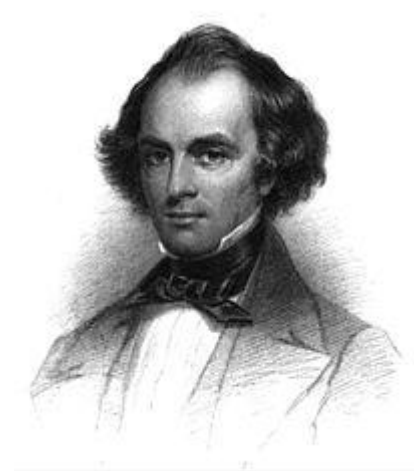
Dimmesdale's psychological anguish deepens, and he invents new tortures for himself. In the meantime, Hester's charitable deeds and quiet humility have earned her a reprieve from the scorn of the community. One night, when Pearl is about seven years old, she and her mother are returning home from a visit to the deathbed of [John Winthrop](#) when they encounter Dimmesdale atop the town scaffold, trying to punish himself for his sins. Hester and Pearl join him, and the three link hands. Dimmesdale refuses Pearl's request that he acknowledge her publicly the next day, and a meteor marks a dull red "A" in the night sky as Dimmesdale sees Chillingworth in the distance. It is interpreted by the townsfolk to mean *Angel*, as a prominent figure in the community had died that night, but Dimmesdale sees it as meaning *adultery*. Hester can see that the minister's condition is worsening, and she resolves to intervene. She goes to Chillingworth and asks him to stop adding to Dimmesdale's self-torment. Chillingworth refuses. She suggests that she may reveal his true identity to Dimmesdale.^[2]

As Hester walks through the forest, she is unable to feel the sunshine. Pearl, on the other hand, basks in it. They coincide with Dimmesdale, also on a stroll through the woods. Hester informs him of the true identity of Chillingworth. The former lovers decide to flee to Europe, where they can live with Pearl as a family. They will take a ship sailing from Boston in four days. Both feel a sense of relief, and Hester removes her scarlet letter and lets down her hair. The sun immediately breaks through the clouds and trees to illuminate her release and joy. Pearl, playing nearby, does not recognize her mother without the letter. She is unnerved and expels a shriek until her mother points out the letter on the ground. Hester beckons Pearl to come to her, but Pearl will not go to her mother until Hester buttons the letter back onto her dress. Pearl then goes to her mother. Dimmesdale gives Pearl a kiss on the forehead, which Pearl immediately tries to wash off in the brook, because he again refuses to make known publicly their relationship. However, he clearly feels a release from the pretense of his former life, and the laws and sins he has lived with.

The day before the ship is to sail, the townspeople gather for a holiday in honor of an election and Dimmesdale preaches his most eloquent sermon ever. Meanwhile, Hester has learned that Chillingworth knows of their plan and has booked passage on the same ship. Dimmesdale, leaving the church after his sermon, sees Hester and Pearl standing before the town scaffold. He looks ill. Knowing his life is about to end, he mounts the scaffold with his lover and his daughter, and confesses publicly, exposing the mark supposedly seared into the flesh of his chest. He dies in Hester's arms after Pearl kisses him. ^[2]

Frustrated in his revenge, Chillingworth dies within the year. Hester and Pearl leave Boston, and no one knows what has happened to them. Many years later, Hester returns alone, still wearing the scarlet letter, to live in her old cottage and resumes her charitable work. She receives occasional letters from Pearl, who was rumored to have married a European aristocrat and established a family of her own. Pearl also inherits all of Chillingworth's money even though he knows she is not his daughter. There is a sense of liberation in her and the townspeople, especially the women, who had finally begun to forgive Hester of her tragic indiscretion. When Hester dies, she is buried in "a new grave near an old and sunken one, in that burial ground beside which [King's Chapel](#) has since been built. It was near that old and sunken grave, yet with a space between, as if the dust of the two sleepers had no right to mingle. Yet one tombstone served for both." The tombstone was decorated with a letter "A", for Hester and Dimmesdale.

[\[edit\]](#) Major themes



[Nathaniel Hawthorne](#)

[\[edit\]](#) Sin

The experience of Hester and Dimmesdale recalls the story of [Adam and Eve](#) because, in both cases, sin results in expulsion and suffering. But it also results in knowledge—specifically, in knowledge of what it means to be immortal. For Hester, the scarlet letter functions as "her passport into regions where other women dared not tread", leading her to "speculate" about her society and herself more "boldly" than anyone else in New England.

As for Dimmesdale, the "cheating minister", his sin gives him "sympathies so intimate with the sinful brotherhood of mankind, so that his chest vibrate[s] in unison with theirs." His

eloquent and powerful sermons derive from this sense of empathy.^[3] The narrative of the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale is quite in keeping with the oldest and most fully authorized principles in [Christian](#) thought. His "Fall" is a descent from apparent grace to his own damnation; he appears to begin in purity but he ends in corruption. The subtlety is that the minister's belief is his own cheating, convincing himself at every stage of his spiritual [pilgrimage](#) that he is saved.^[4]

The rosebush, its beauty a striking contrast to all that surrounds it—as later the beautifully embroidered scarlet A will be—is held out in part as an invitation to find "some sweet moral blossom" in the ensuing, tragic tale and in part as an image that "the deep heart of nature" (perhaps God) may look more kind on the errant Hester and her child than her Puritan neighbors do. Throughout the work, the nature images contrast with the stark darkness of the Puritans and their systems.^[5]

Chillingworth's misshapen body reflects (or symbolizes) the anger in his soul, which builds as the novel progresses, similar to the way Dimmesdale's illness reveals his inner turmoil. The outward man reflects the condition of the heart; an observation thought to be inspired by the deterioration of [Edgar Allan Poe](#), whom Hawthorne "much admired".^[5]

Although Pearl is a complex character, her primary function within the novel is as a symbol. Pearl herself is the embodiment of the scarlet letter, and Hester rightly clothes her in a beautiful dress of scarlet, embroidered with gold thread, just like the scarlet letter upon Hester's bosom.^[3] Parallels can be drawn between Pearl and the character Beatrice in [Rappaccini's Daughter](#). Beatrice is nourished upon poisonous plants, until she herself becomes poisonous. Pearl, in the mysterious prenatal world, imbibes the poison of her parents' guilt.

[\[edit\]](#) Past and present

The clash of past and present is explored in various ways. For example, the character of the old General, whose heroic qualities include a distinguished name, perseverance, integrity, compassion, and moral inner strength, is said to be "the soul and spirit of [New England](#) hardihood". Sometimes he presides over the Custom House run by corrupt public servants, who skip work to sleep, allow or overlook smuggling, and are supervised by an inspector with "no power of thought, nor depth of feeling, no troublesome sensibilities", who is honest enough but without a spiritual compass.^[5]


Hawthorne himself had ambivalent feelings about the role of his ancestors in his life. In his autobiographical sketch, Hawthorne described his ancestors as "dim and dusky", "grave, bearded, sable-cloaked, and steel crowned", "bitter persecutors" whose "better deeds" would be diminished by their bad ones. There can be little doubt of Hawthorne's disdain for the stern morality and rigidity of the Puritans, and he imagined his predecessors' disdainful view of him: unsuccessful in their eyes, worthless and disgraceful. "A writer of story books!" But even as he disagrees with his ancestors' viewpoint, he also feels an instinctual connection to them and, more importantly, a "sense of place" in Salem. Their blood remains in his veins, but their intolerance and lack of humanity becomes the subject of his novel.^[5]

[\[edit\]](#) Puritan Legalism

Another theme is the extreme legalism of the Puritans and how Hester chooses not to conform to their rules and beliefs. Hester was rejected by the villagers even though she spent her life helping the sick and the poor and doing what she could to help them. Because they rejected her, she spent her life mostly in solitude, and wouldn't go to church. As a result, she retreats into her own mind and her own thinking. Her thoughts begin to stretch and go beyond what would be considered by the Puritans as safe or even Christian. She still sees her sin, but begins to look on it differently than the villagers ever have. she begins to believe that a person's earthly sins don't necessarily condemn them. She even goes so far as to tell Dimmesdale that their sin has been paid for by their daily penance and that their sin won't keep them from getting to heaven, however, the Puritans believed that such a sin surely condemns. But Hester had been alienated from the Puritan society, both in her physical life and spiritual life. When Dimmesdale dies, she knows she has to move on because she can no longer conform to the Puritan's strictness. Her thinking is free from religious bounds and she has established her own, different moral standards and beliefs.^[3]

[\[edit\]](#) Publication history



 Engraved illustration from an 1878 edition.

It was long thought that Hawthorne originally planned *The Scarlet Letter* to be a shorter [novelette](#) which was part of a collection to be named *Old Time Legends* and that his publisher, [James Thomas Fields](#), convinced him to expand the work to a full-length novel.^[6] This is not true: Fields persuaded Hawthorne to publish *The Scarlet Letter* alone (along with the earlier-completed "Custom House" essay) but he had nothing to do with the length of the story.^[7] Hawthorne's wife [Sophia](#) later challenged Fields' claims a little inexactly: "he has made the absurd boast that *he* was the sole cause of the Scarlet Letter being published!" She noted that her husband's friend [Edwin Percy Whipple](#), a critic, approached Fields to consider its publication.^[8] The manuscript was written at the Peter Edgerley House in [Salem, Massachusetts](#), still standing as a private residence at 14 Mall Street. It was the last Salem home where the Hawthorne family lived.^[9]

The Scarlet Letter was published as a novel in the spring of 1850 by Ticknor & Fields, beginning Hawthorne's most lucrative period.^[10] When he delivered the final pages to Fields in February 1850, Hawthorne said that "some portions of the book are powerfully written"

but doubted it would be popular.^[11] In fact, the book was an instant best-seller^[12] though, over fourteen years, it brought its author only \$1,500.^[10] Its initial publication brought wide protest from natives of Salem, who did not approve of how Hawthorne had depicted them in his introduction "The Custom-House". A 2,500-copy second edition of *The Scarlet Letter* included a preface by Hawthorne dated March 30, 1850, that stated he had decided to reprint his introduction "without the change of a word... The only remarkable features of the sketch are its frank and genuine good-humor... As to [enmity](#), or ill-feeling of any kind, personal or political, he utterly disclaims such motives".^[13]

The Scarlet Letter was also one of the first mass-produced books in America. Into the mid-nineteenth century, bookbinders of home-grown literature typically hand-made their books and sold them in small quantities. The first mechanized printing of *The Scarlet Letter*, 2,500 volumes, sold out within ten days,^[10] and was widely read and discussed to an extent not much experienced in the young country up until that time. Copies of the first edition are often sought by collectors as rare books, and may fetch up to around \$18,000 [USD](#).

[\[edit\]](#) Critical response

On its publication, critic [Evert Augustus Duyckinck](#), a friend of Hawthorne's, said he preferred the author's [Washington Irving](#)-like tales. Another friend, critic [Edwin Percy Whipple](#), objected to the novel's "morbid intensity" with dense psychological details, writing that the book "is therefore apt to become, like Hawthorne, too painfully anatomical in his exhibition of them".^[14] Most literary critics praised the book but religious leaders took issue with the novel's subject matter.^[15] [Orestes Brownson](#) complained that Hawthorne did not understand Christianity, confession, and remorse.^[citation needed] A review in *[The Church Review and Ecclesiastical Register](#)* concluded the author "perpetrates bad morals."^[16]

On the other hand, 20th century writer [D. H. Lawrence](#) said that there could be not be a more perfect work of the American imagination than *The Scarlet Letter*.^[17] [Henry James](#) once said of the novel, "It is beautiful, admirable, extraordinary; it has in the highest degree that merit which I have spoken of as the mark of Hawthorne's best things--an indefinable purity and lightness of conception...One can often return to it; it supports familiarity and has the inexhaustible charm and mystery of great works of art."^[18]

The book's immediate and lasting success are due to the way it addresses spiritual and moral issues from a uniquely American standpoint.^[citation needed] In 1850, adultery was an extremely [risqué](#) subject, but because Hawthorne had the support of the New England literary establishment, it passed easily into the realm of appropriate reading. It has been said that this work represents the height of Hawthorne's literary genius, dense with terse descriptions. It remains relevant for its philosophical and psychological depth, and continues to be read as a classic tale on a universal theme.^[19]

[\[edit\]](#) Contemporaneous treatments of the theme of adultery

The defeat of the [revolutions of 1848 and 1849 in Europe](#) appears to have unleashed a veritable epidemic of treatments of the theme of adultery. The rebellion of a wife against the fetters of her marriage may be seen as a code for the artist's rebellion against political and

legal authority. In the same year in which *The Scarlet Letter* was published, for instance [Verdi's](#) opera *Stiffelio* was premiered, in which the title character is also a minister; it is not he, but his wife who commits the act of adultery. From 1854 to 1859 [Richard Wagner](#) portrayed adulteresses in *Die Walküre* and *Tristan und Isolde*; at the same time, [Gustave Flaubert](#) was working on *Madame Bovary*.^[20]

[\[edit\]](#) Allusions

The following are historical and Biblical references that appear in *The Scarlet Letter*.

- [Anne Hutchinson](#), mentioned in Chapter 1, The Prison Door, was a religious dissenter (1591–1643). In the 1630s she was excommunicated by the [Puritans](#) and exiled from [Boston](#) and moved to [Rhode Island](#).^[5]
- [Ann Hibbins](#), who historically was executed for witchcraft in Boston in 1656, is depicted in *The Scarlet Letter* as a witch who tries to tempt Prynne to the practice of witchcraft.^{[21][22]}
- [Richard Bellingham](#), who historically was the governor of Massachusetts and deputy governor at the time of Hibbins's execution, was depicted in *The Scarlet Letter* as the brother of Ann Hibbins.
- [Martin Luther](#) (1483–1545) was a leader of the [Protestant Reformation](#) in Germany.
- Sir [Thomas Overbury](#) and Dr. Forman were the subjects of an adultery scandal in 1615 in England. Dr. Forman was charged with trying to poison his adulterous wife and her lover. Overbury was a friend of the lover and was perhaps poisoned.
- [John Winthrop](#) (1588–1649), first governor of the [Massachusetts Bay Colony](#).
- [King's Chapel Burying Ground](#), mentioned in the final paragraph, exists; the [Elizabeth Pain](#) gravestone is traditionally considered an inspiration for the protagonists' grave.
- [Hester Prynne](#) was loosely based on Hawthorne's wife, Sofia Peabody^[citation needed].
- The story of [King David and Bathsheba](#) is depicted in the tapestry in Mr. Dimmesdale's room (chapter 9). (See [II Samuel 11-12](#) for the Biblical story.)

[\[edit\]](#) In popular culture

See also: [Film adaptations of the Scarlet Letter](#) and [The Scarlet Letter in Popular Culture](#)

The Scarlet Letter has been adapted to numerous films, plays and operas and remains frequently referenced in modern [popular culture](#). *The Scarlet Letter* has been adapted in the recent movie [Easy A](#) (stylized as *easy A*), the story of Olive Penderghast ([Emma Stone](#)) who experiences the same isolation Hester Prynne undergoes in the novel.

[\[edit\]](#) See also



- [Colonial history of the United States](#)
- [Boston in fiction](#)
- [Illegitimacy in fiction](#)

[\[edit\]](#) References

[\[edit\]](#) Notes

1. [^] National Public Radio (NPR): March 2, 2008, Sunday. SHOW: Weekend All Things Considered. "Sinner, Victim, Object, Winner" ANCHORS: JACKI LYDEN <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=87805369> (quote in article refers to it as his "masterwork", listen to the audio to hear it the original reference to it being his "magnum opus")
2. [^] ^{[a](#)} ^{[b](#)} ^{[c](#)} ^{[d](#)} ^{[e](#)} [Hawthorne, Nathaniel](#) (May 2, 1994). *The Scarlet Letter of love* (reissue ed.). New York: Dover Publications. [ISBN 0-486-28048-9](#).
3. [^] ^{[a](#)} ^{[b](#)} ^{[c](#)} [The Scarlet Letter - Sparknotes](#)
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5. [^] ^{[a](#)} ^{[b](#)} ^{[c](#)} ^{[d](#)} ^{[e](#)} [The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne - CliffNotes from Yahoo!Education](#)
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10. [^] ^{[a](#)} ^{[b](#)} ^{[c](#)} McFarland, Philip. *Hawthorne in Concord*. New York: Grove Press, 2004: 136. [ISBN 0-8021-1776-7](#)
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19. [^] [The Classic Text: Traditions and Interpretations](#)
20. [^] Kroll, Fredric: [About Nathaniel Hawthorne](#)

21. [^] Schwab, Gabriele. *The mirror and the killer-queen: otherness in literary language*. Indiana University Press. 1996. Pg. 120.
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[[edit](#)] External links


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