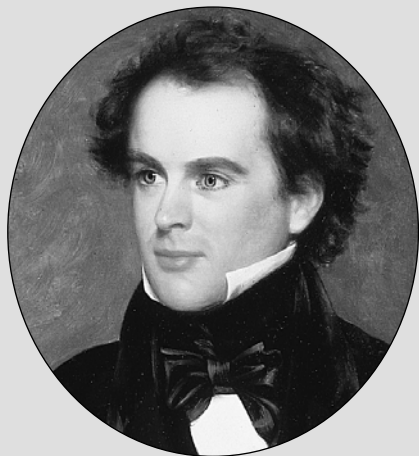


# Meet Nathaniel Hawthorne



*We are made better by all that he writes.*

—Evert Augustus Duyckinck, editor and reviewer

Nathaniel Hawthorne had a low opinion of autobiography and refrained from writing one. In fact, his wife once said, “He had a horror that his life would be written.” Although Hawthorne did not write the story of his life, he left behind a wealth of material—journals, letters, unfinished manuscripts, and published works—that reveal who he was and how he lived.

Hawthorne was born in Salem, Massachusetts. Generations of Hawthornes—as the name was formerly spelled—had lived in Salem. Hawthorne was well aware of their status in the community, though that status was not always admirable. For example, Hawthorne lived with the knowledge that his great-great-grandfather, a judge in the 1692 Salem witch trials, was responsible for the deaths of some of the accused witches. Scholars have concluded that Hawthorne keenly felt the burden of his ancestry and assumed the guilt of his Puritan grandfathers.

When Hawthorne was four years old, his father, a sea captain, died while on a voyage. Hawthorne’s mother, Elizabeth, took the boy and his two sisters to live with her affluent brothers. In this chaotic, crowded, multiple-family home, young Hawthorne somehow managed to foster a love of reading.

After graduating from college, he did not assume a career. He knew only that he was determined to one day become a writer. His first literary work, begun during college, was titled *Fanshawe*. He used his own money to have it published, but soon decided it simply wasn’t good enough to be made public, and so he tried to destroy all the copies that had been printed. All told, Hawthorne spent a dozen years after college reading and writing. He lived with his mother in Salem during this period. Gradually, he met with success; he sold some short stories, which were published under a pseudonym. Finally, in 1837, he published *Twice-Told Tales*, a collection of short stories, under his own name.

Hawthorne continued to write short stories for magazines, but he made only a modest living. After marrying Sophia Peabody in 1842, he appealed to several friends for help in finding a job, and they were able to obtain for him a position at the Salem custom house. He lost his job in 1848, a circumstance that he resented and wrote about in “The Custom-House,” the introductory chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*.

Soon after he lost his job, his mother died. In the midst of his grief, he wrote *The Scarlet Letter*, which was published in 1850. Hawthorne himself felt it to be a gloomy story about a risky subject, but the book met with some success, eventually ensuring Hawthorne’s place in literary history.

Though Hawthorne achieved fame, he was not necessarily comfortable playing the role of revered author. He was shy and avoided making eye contact with people. At home, he was likely to head out the back door if he knew a guest had arrived at the front door. At times he was playful, almost childlike, and unconcerned about appearances. Yet he was a good friend to other authors, including Herman Melville, who dedicated *Moby Dick* to him. More than a century after his death, Hawthorne is still revered as a father of American literature. From this man came, according to Henry James, “the finest piece of imaginative writing yet put forth” in America.