

# Introducing the Novel

Hawthorne wrote *The Scarlet Letter* in an astonishingly short period of time—between the fall of 1849 when his mother died and February 3, 1850, when he repeatedly read the conclusion of the novel to his wife. It tells the story of Hester Prynne, a young woman, in the Puritan town of Boston in the mid-1600s. Hester, found guilty of adultery, is sentenced to wear a scarlet letter A on her chest for the rest of her life. The story also involves her daughter, her daughter's father, and her husband, who arrives in Boston after a prolonged absence.

Using these circumstances as the framework for his novel, Hawthorne weaves around his characters a psychologically powerful tale of the consequences of breaking a moral code. Skillfully, Hawthorne investigates how guilt and sin operate on the innermost workings of his characters' minds.

Literary scholars have hailed Hester Prynne as the first true heroine of American literature. Hawthorne characterizes her as a whole person—woman, mother, sinner, and member of the community—rather than as a stereotype, as so many writers at that time cast their female characters.

In an era when most novelists were concerned with detailed portrayals of the outside physical world, Hawthorne presented mental and emotional truths. In a critical analysis of Hawthorne, Roy R. Male, English professor at the University of Oklahoma, writes:

*Hawthorne possessed what one of his friends called "the awful power of insight," and his fiction remains valuable chiefly because of its penetration into the essential truths of the human heart.*

Preferring to concentrate on the darker, often hidden areas of the human psyche, Hawthorne turns a scrutinizing eye on the thought processes and emotions that occur within the mind of the individual.

Even the otherwise modest Hawthorne admitted that "some portions of the book are powerfully written." Readers and reviewers agreed with him in spite of its subject matter, which was considered very risqué in the mid-1800s.

Many consider Hawthorne to be the first writer to truly represent American perspective and style in a work of fiction. Prior to Hawthorne, no American novelist had yet made an impact on Europe's literary circles. According to Henry James, a later American novelist and critic, "the publication of *The Scarlet Letter* was in the United States a literary event of the first importance." Along with others, James felt "a satisfaction in the idea of America having produced a novel that belonged to literature, and to the forefront of it." Born and raised in the United States, Hawthorne steeps his novel in the early American past, creating characters and a plot that reflect the very roots of American culture.

## THE TIME AND PLACE

*The Scarlet Letter* is set in the mid-1600s in Boston, which had been founded only about two decades earlier. In 1630 hundreds of newly arrived Puritans established a number of settlements in Massachusetts.

The Puritan movement began in the 1500s among people who believed that the Church of England was too much influenced by the Crown and the Catholic Church. As Protestants, the Puritans rejected the belief that divine authority is channeled through any one particular person, such as a pope. Puritans believed that people had the power to receive spiritual enlightenment directly from the teachings of the Bible. The kings and queens of England did not always agree with the Puritans. When Charles I closed Parliament in 1629 and pressured Puritan members to conform, some Puritans traveled to the American colonies to gain religious freedom and establish new lives.

The colony of Massachusetts began as a trading firm called the Massachusetts Bay Company. The president of the company was called the governor. A deputy-governor, filled the role of vice-president. Eighteen assistants served as the equivalent of a board of directors. The investors, or stockholders, were freemen. The stockholders made up the General Court, which met four

times a year to elect company officers and vote on company affairs.

Once the Company was established in Massachusetts, its leaders created a colony. Company officers became the governmental leaders. These leaders had been prominent men in England, and some held royal titles. All were securely seated in the established upper class and were accustomed to ruling. Similarly, the freemen were accustomed to being ruled.

These residents of Boston in the mid-1600s were much as Hawthorne depicts them—hard-working and devoted to their way of life. Their society had been carved out for them by John Winthrop, the first governor of Massachusetts and a resident of Boston. As a leader of the first residents of the colony, he established a government based on a combination of religious and civil ideals. The colony was intended to be an ideal Christian community.

### Did You Know?

Though Hawthorne always had doubts about the quality of his work, he was especially concerned about *The Scarlet Letter*. He felt the story was too bleak, and so he wrote what he called an introductory essay to add interest for his readers. In a letter to Horatio Bridge dated 4 February 1850, Hawthorne wrote:

*There is an introduction to this book—giving a sketch of my Custom-House life, with an imaginative touch here and there—which perhaps may be more widely attractive than the main narrative.*

Scholars disagree as to the value of “The

Custom House.” Many feel, contrary to Hawthorne’s opinion, that the novel stands well enough on its own without the essay.

“The Custom House” is semi-autobiographical. Hawthorne is generally considered to be the narrator, and speaks of his work at the Custom House, of losing that position, and of his Salem ancestors. The narrator supposedly discovers Hester Prynne’s embroidered letter and some notes about what happened to her. The narrator feels compelled to tell her story, but unable to do so in the stifling atmosphere of the Custom House. Upon being released, however, the