NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

THE SCARLET LETTER

EXTENDED ANNOTATED EDITION

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Nathaniel Hawthorne – A Biographical Primer

By Edward Everett Hale

American novelist: b. Salem, Mass., 4 July 1804; d. Plymouth, N. H., 19 May 1864. The founder of the family in

America was William Hathorne (as the name was then spelled), a typical Puritan and a public man of importance. John, his son, was a judge, one of those presiding over the witchcraft trials. Of Joseph in the next generation little is said, but Daniel, next in decent, followed the sea and commanded a privateer in the Revolution, while his son Nathaniel, father of the romancer, was also a sea Captain. This pure New England descent gave a personal character to Hawthorne's presentations of New England life; when he writes of the strictness of the early Puritans, of the forests haunted by Indians, of the magnificence of the provincial days, of men high in the opinion of their towns-people, of the reaching out to far lands and exotic splendors, he is expressing the stored-up experience of his race. His father died when Nathaniel was but four and the little family lived a secluded life with his mother. He was a handsome boy and quite devoted to reading, by an early accident which for a time prevented outdoor games. His first school was with Dr. Worcester, the lexicographer. In 1818 his mother moved to Raymond, Me., where her brother had bought land, and Hawthorne went to Bowdoin College. He entered college at the age of 17 in the same class with Longfellow. In the class above him was Franklin Pierce, afterward 12th President of the United States. On being graduated in 1825 Hawthorne determined upon literature as a profession, but his first efforts were without success. ‘Fanshawe’ was published anonymously in 1828, and shorter tales and sketches were without importance. Little need be said of these earlier years save to note that they were full of reading and observation. In 1836 he edited in Boston the *American Magazine for Useful and Entertaining Knowledge*, but gained little from it save an introduction to ‘The Token,’ in which his tales first came to be known. Returning to Salem he lived a very secluded life, seeing almost no one (rather a family trait), and devoted to his thoughts and imaginations. He was a strong and powerful

man, of excellent health and, though silent, cheerful, and a delightful companion when be chose. But intellectually he was of a separated and individual type, having his own extravagances and powers and submitting to no companionship in influence. In 1837 appeared ‘Twice Told Tales’ in book form: in a preface written afterward Hawthorne says that he was at this time “the obscurest man of letters in America.” Gradually he began to be more widely received. In 1839 he became engaged to Miss Sophia Peabody, but was not married for some years. In 1838 he was appointed to a place in the Boston custom house, but found that he could not easily save time enough for literature and was not very sorry when the change of administration put him out of office. In 1841 was founded the socialistic community at Brook Farm: it seemed to Hawthorne that here was a chance for a union of intellectual and physical work, whereby he might make a suitable home for his future wife. It failed to fulfil his expectations and Hawthorne withdrew from the experiment. In 1842 he was married and moved with his wife to the Old Manse at Concord just above the historic bridge. Here chiefly he wrote the ‘Mosses of an Old Manse’ (1846). In 1845 he published a second series of ‘Twice Told Tales’; in this year also the family moved to Salem, where he had received the appointment of surveyor at the custom house. As before, official work was a hindrance to literature; not till 1849 when he lost his position could he work seriously. He used his new-found leisure in carrying out a theme that had been long in his mind and produced ‘The Scarlet Letter’ in 1850. This, the first of his longer novels, was received with enthusiasm and at once gave him a distinct place in literature. He now moved to Lenox, Mass., where he began on ‘The House of Seven Gables,’ which was published in 1851. He also wrote ‘A Wonder-Book’ here, which in its way has become as famous as his more important work. In December 1851 he moved to West

Newton, and shortly to Concord again, this time to the Wayside. At Newton he wrote ‘The Blithedale Romance.’ Having settled himself at Concord in the summer of 1852, his first literary work was to write the life of his college friend, Franklin Pierce, just nominated for the Presidency. This done he turned to ‘Tanglewood Tales,’ a volume not unlike the ‘Wonder-Book.’ In 1853 he was named consul to Liverpool: at first he declined the position, but finally resolved to take this opportunity to see something of Europe. He spent four years in England, and then a year in Italy. As before, he could write nothing while an official, and resigned in 1857 to go to Rome, where he passed the winter, and to Florence, where he received suggestions and ideas which gave him stimulus for literary work. The summer of 1858 he passed at Redcar, in Yorkshire, where he wrote ‘The Marble Faun.’ In June 1860 he sailed for America, where he returned to the Wayside. For a time he did little literary work; in 1863 he published ‘Our Old Home,’ a series of sketches of English life, and planned a new novel, ‘The Dolliver Romance,’ also called ‘Pansie.’ But though he suffered from no disease his vitality seemed relaxed; some unfortunate accidents had a depressing effect, and in the midst of a carriage trip into the White Mountains with his old friend, Franklin Pierce, he died suddenly at Plymouth, N. H., early in the morning, 19 May 1864.

The works of Hawthorne consist of novels, short stories, tales for children, sketches of life and travel and some miscellaneous pieces of a biographical or descriptive character. Besides these there were published after his death extracts from his notebooks. Of his novels ‘The Scarlet Letter’ is a story of old New England; it has a powerful moral idea at bottom, but it is equally strong in its presentation of life and character in the early days of Massachusetts. ‘House of the Seven Gables’ presents New

England life of a later date; there is more of careful analysis and presentation of character and more description of life and manners, but less moral intensity. ‘The Blithedale Romance’ is less strong; Hawthorne seems hardly to grasp his subject. It makes the third in what may be called a series of romances presenting the molding currents of New England life: the first showing the factors of religion and sin, the second the forces of hereditary good and evil, and the third giving a picture of intellectual and emotional ferment in a society which had come from very different beginnings. ‘Septimius Felton,’ finished in the main but not published by Hawthorne, is a fantastic story dealing with the idea of immortality. It was put aside by Hawthorne when he began to write ‘The Dolliver Romance,’ of which he completed only the first chapters. ‘Dr. Grimshaw's Secret’ (published in 1882) is also not entirely finished. These three books represent a purpose that Hawthorne never carried out. He had presented New England life, with which the life of himself and his ancestry was so indissolubly connected, in three characteristic phases. He had traced New England history to its source. He now looked back across the ocean to the England he had learned to know, and thought of a tale that should bridge the gulf between the Old World and the New. But the stories are all incomplete and should be read only by the student. The same thing may be said of ‘Fanshawe,’ which was published anonymously early in Hawthorne's life and later withdrawn from circulation. ‘The Marble Faun’ presents to us a conception of the Old World at its oldest point. It is Hawthorne's most elaborate work, and if every one were familiar with the scenes so discursively described, would probably be more generally considered his best. Like the other novels its motive is based on the problem of evil, but we have not precisely atonement nor retribution, as in his first two novels. The story is one of development, a transformation of the soul through the

overcoming of evil. The four novels constitute the foundation of Hawthorne's literary fame and character, but the collections of short stories do much to develop and complete the structure. They are of various kinds, as follows: (1) Sketches of current life or of history, as ‘Rills from the Town Pump,’ ‘The Village Uncle,’ ‘Main Street,’ ‘Old News.’ These are chiefly descriptive and have little story; there are about 20 of them. (2) Stories of old New England, as ‘The Gray Champion,’ ‘The Gentle Boy,’ ‘Tales of the Province House.’ These stories are often illustrative of some idea and so might find place in the next set. (3) Stories based upon some idea, as ‘Ethan Brand,’ which presents the idea of the unpardonable sin; ‘The Minister's Black Veil,’ the idea of the separation of each soul from its fellows; ‘Young Goodman Brown,’ the power of doubt in good and evil. These are the most characteristic of Hawthorne's short stories; there are about a dozen of them. (4) Somewhat different are the allegories, as ‘The Great Stone Face,’ ‘Rappacini's Daughter,’ ‘The Great Carbuncle.’ Here the figures are not examples or types, but symbols, although in no story is the allegory consistent. (5) There are also purely fantastic developments of some idea, as ‘The New Adam and Eve,’ ‘The Christmas Banquet,’ ‘The Celestial Railroad.’ These differ from the others in that there is an almost logical development of some fancy, as in case of the first the idea of a perfectly natural pair being suddenly introduced to all the conventionalities of our civilization. There are perhaps 20 of these fantasies. Hawthorne's stories from classical mythology, the ‘Wonder-Book’ and ‘Tanglewood Tales,’ belong to a special class of books, those in which men of genius have retold stories of the past in forms suited to the present. The stories themselves are set in a piece of narrative and description which gives the atmosphere of the time of the writer, and the old legends are turned from stately myths not merely to children's stories, but to romantic fancies. Mr. Pringle in

‘Tanglewood Fireside’ comments on the idea: “Eustace,” he says to the young college student who had been telling the stories to the children, “pray let me advise you never more to meddle with a classical myth. Your imagination is altogether Gothic and will inevitably Gothicize everything that you touch. The effect is like bedaubing a marble statue with paint. This giant, now! How can you have ventured to thrust his huge disproportioned mass among the seemly outlines of Grecian fable?” “I described the giant as he appeared to me,” replied the student, “And, sir, if you would only bring your mind into such a relation to these fables as is necessary in order to remodel them, you would see at once that an old Greek has no more exclusive right to them than a modern Yankee has. They are the common property of the world and of all time” (“Wonder-Book,” p. 135). ‘Grandfather's Chair’ was also written primarily for children and gives narratives of New England history, joined together by a running comment and narrative from Grandfather, whose old chair had come to New England, not in the *Mayflower*, but with John Winthrop and the first settlers of Boston. ‘Biographical Stories,’ in a somewhat similar framework, tells of the lives of Franklin, Benjamin West and others. It should be noted of these books that Hawthorne's writings for children were always written with as much care and thought as his more serious work. ‘Our Old Home’ was the outcome of that less remembered side of Hawthorne's genius which was a master of the details of circumstance and surroundings. The notebooks give us this also, but the American notebook has also rather a peculiar interest in giving us many of Hawthorne's first ideas which were afterward worked out into stories and sketches.

One element in Hawthorne's intellectual make-up was his interest in the observation of life and his power of description of scenes, manners and character. This is to be seen especially, as has been said, in his notebooks and in

‘Our Old Home,’ and in slightly modified form in the sketches noted above. These studies make up a considerable part of ‘Twice Told Tales’ and ‘Mosses from an Old Manse,’ and represent a side of Hawthorne's genius not always borne in mind. Had this interest been predominant in him we might have had in Hawthorne as great a novelist of our everyday life as James or Howells. In the ‘House of Seven Gables’ the power comes into full play; 100 pages hardly complete the descriptions of the simple occupations of a single uneventful day. In Hawthorne, however, this interest in the life around him was mingled with a great interest in history, as we may see, not only in the stories of old New England noted above, but in the descriptive passages of ‘The Scarlet Letter.’ Still we have not, even here, the special quality for which we know Hawthorne. Many great realists have written historical novels, for the same curiosity that absorbs one in the affairs of everyday may readily absorb one in the recreation of the past. In Hawthorne, however, was another element very different. His imagination often furnished him with conceptions having little connection with the actual circumstances of life. The fanciful developments of an idea noted above (5) have almost no relation to fact: they are “made up out of his own head.” They are fantastic enough, but generally they are developments of some moral idea and a still more ideal development of such conceptions was not uncommon in Hawthorne. ‘Rappacini's Daughter’ is an allegory in which the idea is given a wholly imaginary setting, not resembling anything that Hawthorne had ever known from observation. These two elements sometimes appear in Hawthorne's work separate and distinct just as they did in his life: sometimes he secluded himself in his room, going out only after nightfall; sometimes he wandered through the country observing life and meeting with everybody. But neither of these elements alone produced anything great, probably because for anything

great we need the whole man. The true Hawthorne was a combination of these two elements, with various others of personal character, and artistic ability that cannot be specified here. The most obvious combination between these two elements, so far as literature is concerned, between the fact of external life and the idea of inward imagination, is by a symbol. The symbolist sees in everyday facts a presentation of ideas. Hawthorne wrote a number of tales that are practically allegories: ‘The Great Stone Face’ uses facts with which Hawthorne was familiar, persons and scenes that he knew, for the presentation of a conception of the ideal. His novels, too, are full of symbolism. ‘The Scarlet Letter’ itself is a symbol and the rich clothing of Little Pearl, Alice's posies among the Seven Gables, the old musty house itself, are symbols, Zenobia's flower, Hilda's doves. But this is not the highest synthesis of power, as Hawthorne sometimes felt himself, as when he said of ‘The Great Stone Face,’ that the moral was too plain and manifest for a work of art. However much we may delight in symbolism it must be admitted that a symbol that represents an idea only by a fanciful connection will not bear the seriousness of analysis of which a moral idea must be capable. A scarlet letter A has no real connection with adultery, which begins with A and is a scarlet sin only to such as know certain languages and certain metaphors. So Hawthorne aimed at a higher combination of the powers of which he was quite aware, and found it in figures and situations in which great ideas are implicit. In his finest work we have, not the circumstance before the conception or the conception before the circumstance, as in allegory. We have the idea in the fact, as it is in life, the two inseparable. Hester Prynne's life does not merely present to us the idea that the breaking of a social law makes one a stranger to society with its advantages and disadvantages. Hester is the result of her breaking that law. The story of Donatello is not merely a way of conveying the idea that

the soul which conquers evil thereby grows strong in being and life. Donatello himself is such a soul growing and developing. We cannot get the idea without the fact, nor the fact without the idea. This is the especial power of Hawthorne, the power of presenting truth implicit in life. Add to this his profound preoccupation with the problem of evil in this world, with its appearance, its disappearance, its metamorphoses, and we have a due to Hawthorne's greatest works. In ‘The Scarlet Letter,’ ‘The House of Seven Gables,’ ‘The Marble Faun,’ ‘Ethan Brand,’ ‘The Gray Champion,’ the ideas cannot be separated from the personalities which express them. It is this which constitutes Hawthorne's lasting power in literature. His observation is interesting to those that care for the things that he describes, his fancy amuses, or charms or often stimulates our ideas. His short stories are interesting to a student of literature because they did much to give a definite character to a literary form which has since become of great importance. His novels are exquisite specimens of what he himself called the romance, in which the figures and scenes are laid in a world a little more poetic than that which makes up our daily surrounding. But Hawthorne's really great power lay in his ability to depict life so that we are made keenly aware of the dominating influence of moral motive and moral law

The Scarlet Letter - A Review By Dr. George Bailey Loring

It would be hard to conceive of a greater outrage upon the freezing and self-denying doctrines of that day, than the sin for which Hester Prynne was damned by society, and for which Arthur Dimmesdale damned himself. For centuries,

the devoted and superstitious Catholic had made it a part of his creed to cast disgrace upon the passions; and the cold and rigid Puritan, with less fervor, and consequently with less beauty, had driven them out of his paradise, as the parents of all sin. There was no recognition of the intention or meaning of that sensuous element of human nature which, gilding life like a burnishing sunset, lays the foundation of all that beauty which seeks its expression in poetry, and music, and art, and gives the highest apprehension of religious fervor. Zest of life was no part of the Puritan's belief. He scorned his own flesh and blood. His appetites were crimes. His cool head was always ready to temper the hot blood in its first tendency to come bounding from his heart. He had no sympathy, no tenderness, for any sinner, more especially for that hardened criminal who had failed to trample all his senses beneath his feet. Love, legalized, was a weakness in the mind of that mighty dogmatist, who, girt with the 'sword of the Lord and of Gideon,' subdued his enemies, and, with folios of texts and homilies, sustained and cheered his friends; and love, illegalized, was that burning, scarlet sin which had no forgiveness in these disciples of Him who said to the woman, 'neither do I condemn thee.' The state of society which this grizzly form of humanity created, probably served as little to purify men as any court of voluptuousness; and, while we recognize with compressed lip that heroism which braved seas and unknown shores, for opinion's sake, we remember, with a warm glow, the elegances and intrepid courage and tropical luxuriance of the cavaliers whom they left behind them. Asceticism and voluptuarism on either hand, neither fruitful of the finer and truer virtues, were all that men had arrived at in the great work of sensuous life.

It was as heir of these virtues, and impressed with this education, that Arthur Dimmesdale, a clergyman, believing

in and applying all the moral remedies of the times, found himself a criminal. We learn nothing of his experience during the seven long years in which his guilt was secretly gnawing at his breast, unless it be the experience of pain and remorse. He speaks no word of wisdom. He lurks and skulks behind the protection of his profession and his social position, neither growing wiser nor stronger, but, day after day, paler and paler, more and more abject. We do not find that, out of his sin, came any revelation of virtue. No doubt exists of his repentance, of that repentance which is made up of sorrow for sin, and which grows out of fear of consequences; but we learn nowhere that his enlightened conscience, rising above the dogmas and catechistic creeds of the day, by dint of his own deep and solemn spiritual experiences, taught him what obligations had gathered around him, children of his crime, which he was bound to acknowledge before men, as they stood revealed to God. Why had his religious wisdom brought him no more heroism? He loved Hester Prynne--he had bound himself to her by an indissoluble bond, and yet he had neither moral courage nor moral honesty, with all his impressive piety, to come forth and assert their sins and their mutual obligations. He was, evidently, a man of powerful nature. His delicate sensibility, his fervor, his influence upon those about him, and, above all, his sin, committed when the tides of his heart rushed in and swept away all the bulrush barriers he had heaped up against them, through years of studious self-discipline,--show what a spirit, what forces, he had. Against none of these forces had he sinned. And yet he was halting, and wavering, and becoming more and more perplexed and worn down with woe, because he had violated the dignity of his position, and had broken a law which his education had made more prominent than any law in his own soul. In this way, he presented the twofold nature which belongs to us as members of society;--a nature born from ourselves and our associations, and

comprehending all the diversity and all the harmony of our individual and social duties. Violation of either destroys our fitness for both. And when we remember that, in this development, no truth comes except from harmony, no beauty except from a fit conjunction of the individual with society, and of society with the individual, can we wonder that the great elements of Arthur Dimmesdale's character should have been overbalanced by a detestable crowd of mean and grovelling qualities, warmed into life by the hot antagonism he felt radiating upon himself and all his fellow-men--from the society in which he moved, and from which he received his engrafted moral nature? He sinned in the arms of society, and fell almost beyond redemption; his companion in guilt became an outcast, and a flood of heroic qualities gathered around her. Was this the work of social influences? . . .

In this matter of crime, as soon as he became involved, he appeared before himself no longer a clergyman, but a man--a human being. He answered society in the cowardly way we have seen. He answered himself in that way which every soul adopts, where crime does not penetrate. The physical facts of crime alone, with which society has to do, in reality constitute sin. Crimes are committed under protest of the soul, more or less decided, as the weary soul itself has been more or less besieged and broken. The war in the individual begins, and the result of the fierce struggle is the victory of the sensual over the spiritual, when the criminal act is committed. If there is no such war, there is no crime; let the deed be what it may, and be denominated what it may, by society. The soul never assents to sin, and weeps with the angels when the form in which it dwells violates the sacred obligations it imposes upon it. When this human form, with its passions and tendencies, commits the violation, and, at the same time, abuses society, it is answerable to this latter tribunal,

where it receives its judgment; while the soul flees to her God, dismayed and crushed by the conflict, but not deprived of her divine inheritance. Between the individual and his God, there remains a spot, larger or smaller, as the soul has been kept unclouded, where no sin can enter, where no mediation can come, where all the discords of his life are resolved into the most delicious harmonies, and his whole existence becomes illuminated by a divine intelligence. Sorrow and sin reveal this spot to all men--as, through death, we are born to an immortal life. They reveal what beliefs and dogmas becloud and darken. They produce that intense consciousness, without which virtue can not rise above innocency. They are the toil and trial which give strength and wisdom, and which, like all other toil, produce weariness and fainting and death, if pursued beyond the limit where reaction and the invigorating process begin. We can not think with too much awe upon the temptations and trials which beset the powerful. The solemn gloom which shuts down over a mighty nature, during the struggle, which it recognizes with vivid sense, between its demon and its divinity, is like that fearful night in which no star appears to relieve the murky darkness. And yet, from such a night as this, and from no other, the grandeur of virtue has risen to beautify and warm and bless the broad universe of human hearts, and to make the whole spiritual creation blossom like the rose. The Temptation and Gethsemane,--these are the miracles which have redeemed mankind.

Thus it stands with the individual and his soul. With himself and society come up other obligations, other influences, other laws. The tribunal before which he stands as a social being can not be disregarded with impunity. The effects of education and of inheritance cling around us with the tenacity of living fibres of our own bodies, and they govern, with closest intimacy, the estimate of deeds which

constitute the catalogue of vice and virtue, and which in their commission elevate or depress our spiritual condition.

We doubt if there is a stronger element in our natures than that which forbids our resisting with impunity surrounding social institutions. However much we may gain in the attempt, it is always attended with some loss. The reverence which enhanced so beautifully the purity and innocence of childhood, often receives its death-blow from that very wisdom out of which comes our mature virtue. Those abstractions whose foundation is the universe, and without an apprehension of which we may go handcuffed and fettered through life, may draw us away from the devotion which deepened and gilded the narrow world in which we were strong by belief alone. The institutions in which we were born controlled in a great degree the mental condition of our parents, as surrounding nature did their physical, and we owe to these two classes of internal and external operations the characters we inherit. An attack, therefore, upon these institutions, affects us to a certain degree as if we were warring against ourselves. Reason and conscience, and our sublimest sense of duty, may call us to the work of reform,--instinct resists. And the nervous energy called for in the struggle is felt through our whole frames with a convulsive influence, while our children seem to have been born with the spirit of unrest. That harmonious calm, out of which alone healthy creations can arise, appeals to all man's interests, even when the quiet sky he is admiring overhangs an ill-cultivated and sterile field. As he puts in his ploughshare for the upturning of the first furrow, he looks over the expanse which the rest of ages has sanctified, and sighs a farewell to the failure of the past, and a sad and sorrowful welcome to the toil and doubt and undeveloped promise of the future.

This law of our nature, which applies to the well-directed and honest efforts of good progressive intentions, applies also to misguided and sinful actions. The stormy life of the erring mother affords no rest for the healthy development of her embryonic child. It amounts to but little for her to say, with Hester Prynne, 'what we did had a consecration of its own,' unless that consecration produces a heavenly calm, as if all nature joined in harmony. Pearl, that wild and fiery little elf, born of love, was also born of conflict; and had the accountability of its parents extended no farther than the confines of this world, the prospective debt due this offspring involved fearful responsibilities. How vividly this little child typified all their startled instincts, their convulsive efforts in life and thought, their isolation, and their self-inflicted contest with and distrust of all mankind. Arthur Dimmesdale, shrinking from intimate contact and intercourse with his child, shrunk from a visible and tangible representation of the actual life which his guilty love had created for himself and Hester Prynne;--love, guilty, because, secured as it may have been to them, it drove them violently from the moral centre around which they revolved . . . .

It is no pleasant matter to contemplate what is called the guilt of this woman; but it may be instructive, nevertheless. We naturally shrink from any apparent violation of virtue and chastity, and are very ready to forget, in our eager condemnation, how much that is beautiful and holy may be involved in it. We forget that what society calls chastity is often far the reverse, and that a violation of this perverted virtue may be a sad, sorrowful, and tearful beauty, which we would silently and reverently contemplate,--silently, lest a harsh word of the law wound our hearts,--reverently, as we would listen to the fervent prayer. While we dread that moral hardness which would allow a human being to be wrecked in a storm of passion, let us not be unmindful of

the holy love which may long and pray for its development. Man's heart recognizes this, whether society will or not. The struggle and the sacrifice which the latter calls a crime, the former receives as an exhilarating air of virtue . . . It is this recognition which brought forth the words, 'Neither do I condemn thee.' And it is only when we harden our hearts to a capacity for receiving the utmost rigor of the law, and render them cold, keen, and glittering, by the formularies of social virtue, that we are ready to cast out the sinner. Properly attuned, we look earnestly into his life, in search of that hidden virtue, which his crime may stand pointing at.

We would not condemn the vigilance and sensitiveness of society, were it really a tribute paid to the true sanctity of virtue. But is there no deeper sense, which wears out a life of martyrdom in obedience to the demands of the world? Is there no suffering which goes unrecognized, because it interferes with no avowed rights? Is there no violation of social law more radical and threatening than any wayward act of passion can be? It may be necessary, perhaps, that the safety of associated man demands all the compromises which the superficiality of social law creates, but the sorrow may be none the less acute because the evil is necessary. We see in the lives of Arthur Dimmesdale and Hester Prynne, that the severity of puritanic law and morals could not keep them from violation; and we see, too, that this very severity drove them both into a state of moral insanity. And does any benefit arise from such a sacrifice? Not a gentle word, or look, or thought, met those two erring mortals. Revenge embittered the heart of the old outraged usurper. Severity--blasting, and unforgiving, and sanctimonious--was the social atmosphere which surrounded them. We doubt not that, to many minds, this severity constitutes the saving virtue of the book. But it is always with a fearful sacrifice of all the gentler feelings of

the breast, of all the most comprehensive humanity, of all the most delicate affections and appreciations, that we thus rudely shut out the wanderer from us; especially when the path of error leads through the land whence come our warmest and tenderest influences. We gain nothing by this hardness, except a capability to sin without remorse. The elements of character upon which vice and virtue hang are so nearly allied, that the rude attempts to destroy the one may result in a fatal wounding of the other; the harvest separates the tares from the wheat with the only safety. Who has not felt the forbidding aspect of that obtrusive and complacent virtue which never cherishes the thought of forgiveness? And who, that has recognized the deep and holy meaning of the human affections, has not been frozen into demanding a warmhearted crime as a relief for the cold, false, vulgar, and cowardly asperity which is sometimes called chastity?

The Scarlet Letter – A Review By Rev. Arthur Cleveland Coxe

Why has our author selected such a theme? Why, amid all the suggestive incidents of life in a wilderness; of a retreat from civilization to which, in every individual case, a thousand circumstances must have concurred to reconcile human nature with estrangement from home and country; or amid the historical connections of our history with Jesuit adventure, savage invasion, regicide outlawry, and French aggression, should the taste of Mr. Hawthorne have preferred as the proper material for romance, the nauseous amour of a Puritan pastor, with a frail creature of his charge, whose mind is represented as far more debauched than her body? Is it, in short, because a running underside of filth has become as requisite to a romance, as death in

the fifth act to a tragedy? Is the French era actually begun in our literature? And is the flesh, as well as the world and the devil, to be henceforth dished up in fashionable novels, and discussed at parties, by spinsters and their beaux, with as unconcealed a relish as they give to the vanilla in their ice cream? We would be slow to believe it, and we hope our author would not willingly have it so, yet we honestly believe that "the Scarlet Letter" has already done not a little to degrade our literature, and to encourage social licentiousness: it has started other pens on like enterprises, and has loosed the restraint of many tongues, that have made it an apology for "the evil communications which corrupt good manners." We are painfully tempted to believe that it is a book made for the market, and that the market has made it merchantable, as they do game, by letting everybody understand that the commodity is in high condition, and smells strongly of incipient putrefaction.

We shall entirely mislead our reader if we give him to suppose that "the Scarlet Letter" is coarse in its details, or indecent in its phraseology. This very article of our own, is far less suited to ears polite, than any page of the romance before us; and the reason is, we call things by their right names, while the romance never hints the shocking words that belong to its things, but, like Mephistophiles, insinuates that the arch-fiend himself is a very tolerable sort of person, if nobody would call him Mr. Devil. We have heard of persons who could not bear the reading of some Old Testament Lessons in the service of the Church: such persons would be delighted with our author's story; and damsels who shrink at the reading of the Decalogue, would probably luxuriate in bathing their imagination in the crystal of its delicate sensuality. The language of our author, like patent blacking, "would not soil the whitest linen," and yet the composition itself, would suffice, if well laid on, to Ethiopize the snowiest conscience that ever sat

like a swan upon that mirror of heaven, a Christian maiden's imagination. We are not sure we speak quite strong enough, when we say, that we would much rather listen to the coarsest scene of Goldsmith's "Vicar," read aloud by a sister or daughter, than to hear from such lips, the perfectly chaste language of a scene in "the Scarlet Letter," in which a married wife and her reverend paramour, with their unfortunate offspring, are introduced as the actors, and in which the whole tendency of the conversation is to suggest a sympathy for their sin, and an anxiety that they may be able to accomplish a successful escape beyond the seas, to some country where their shameful commerce may be perpetuated. Now, in Goldsmith's story there are very coarse words, but we do not remember anything that saps the foundations of the moral sense, or that goes to create unavoidable sympathy with unrepenting sorrow, and deliberate, premeditated sin. The "Vicar of Wakefield" is sometimes coarsely virtuous, but "the Scarlet Letter" is delicately immoral.

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But in Hawthorne's tale, the lady's frailty is philosophized into a natural and necessary result of the Scriptural law of marriage, which, by holding her irrevocably to her vows, as plighted to a dried up old book worm, in her silly girlhood, is viewed as making her heart an easy victim to the adulterer. The sin of her seducer too, seems to be considered as lying not so much in the deed itself, as in his long concealment of it, and, in fact, the whole moral of the tale is given in the words--"Be true--be true," as if sincerity in sin were virtue, and as if "Be clean--be clean," were not the more fitting conclusion. "The untrue man" is, in short, the hang-dog of the narrative, and the unclean one is made a very interesting sort of a person, and as the two qualities are united in the hero, their composition creates the

interest of his character. Shelley himself never imagined a more dissolute conversation than that in which the polluted minister comforts himself with the thought, that the revenge of the injured husband is worse than his own sin in instigating it. "Thou and I never did so, Hester"--he suggests and she responds--"never, never! What we did had a consecration of its own, we felt it so--we said so to each other!" This is a little too much--it carries the Bay-theory a little too far for our stomach! "Hush, Hester!" is the sickish rejoinder; and fie, Mr. Hawthorne! is the weakest token of our disgust that we can utter. The poor bemired hero and heroine of the story should not have been seen wallowing in their filth, at such a rate as this.

Introduction To The Scarlet Letter

The sight of the Salem Custom-house gives one the same prick of amazed indignation which comes with the vision of fourteenth-century London, "small, and white, and clean," where "nigh the thronged wharf Geoffrey Chaucer's pen" moved "over bills of lading." Yet Hawthorne welcomed his appointment as Surveyor of Customs. It was, he deemed, more necessary to be a man than to be an author. Mosses from an Old Manse did not pay the modest bills of the Old Manse. Hawthorne knew not only present want and the smart of shame before his creditors, but harassing anxiety for the future of those whose protection he had taken upon himself. Blithely and bravely Mrs. Hawthorne wrote to her mother of the household straits: "The other day, when my husband saw me contemplating an appalling vacuum in his dressing-gown, he said he was 'a man of the largest rents in the country, and it was strange he had not more ready

money.' Our rents are certainly not to be computed; for everything seems now to be wearing out all at once, and I expect the dogs will begin to bark soon, according to the inspired dictum of Mother Goose." A few months later, in September, 1845, she wrote that Hawthorne's disturbance of mind over his affairs persisted even in face of that philosophy of acquiescence and optimism preached to him by his transcendental neighbor: "It is wholly new to him to be in debt, and he cannot 'whistle for it,' as Mr. Emerson advised him to do, telling him that everybody was in debt, and that they were all worse than he was." The appointment to the Salem Surveyorship, at a salary of twelve hundred dollars, was made the following March, in Polk's administration. Hawthorne was not freed from financial worry, however, until ten years later, when, at last, he could write back to Bridge from Liverpool, "If I die, or am brain-stricken, my family will not be beggars, the dread of which has often troubled me in times past."

Hawthorne seems to have been a Democrat by inheritance rather than by conviction. His father was a Democrat, and as for himself, he nonplussed inquirers by the response, "I don't understand history till it's a hundred years old, and meantime it's safe to belong to the Democratic party." The Whigs had the wealth and culture of New England on their side, and a literary Democrat was still so rare a bird that Hawthorne had already been admitted to a share in the spoils of office. In Van Buren's day, the teller of Twice-Told Tales had spent two years in the Boston Custom-house as weigher and gauger, becoming convinced in that "unblest" employment,--a "profession," he called it, "somewhat akin to that of a chimney-sweep," that "Christian's burden consisted of coal." Lovely fantasies had haunted him even there, on the clattering wharves and on the grimy decks of foreign schooners, but the Journal soon confesses: "I do detest all offices,--all, at least, that are held

on a political tenure. And I want nothing to do with politicians. Their hearts wither away, and die out of their bodies. Their consciences are turned to india-rubber, or to some substance as black as that, and which will stretch as much. One thing, if no more, I have gained by my custom-house experience, to know a politician." Yet his knowledge was not so complete, even after his loss of the Boston office on Harrison's succession, but that a movement for his dismissal from the Salem Custom-house, carried through by leading Whigs of the town promptly on Taylor's election, took him by surprise. The stealthy charges against him he could, when be was able to find out what they were, easily refute, but meanwhile his Surveyorship was gone, ill feeling was aroused, and Salem had become to him an "abominable city."

Hawthorne's valediction to his native place constitutes the introductory sketch to The Scarlet Letter, deeply resented by some of his fellow-townsmen, especially by those connected with the Custom House. Hawthorne seems to have been hardly aware, in advance, of how keen an edge his quiet vengeance carried, although he stoutly refused, in his preface to the second edition, to withdraw a single word. He wrote to Bridge, February 4, 1850, while The Scarlet Letter was in press: "There is an introduction to this book giving a sketch of my custom-house life, with an imaginative touch here and there, which may, perhaps, be more widely attractive than the main narrative. The latter lacks sunshine." Perhaps Bridge, when he had read the book, expressed some misgivings about the introductory chapter, for we find Hawthorne writing, April 13: "I am glad you like 'The Scarlet Letter.' . . . As to the Salem people, I really thought that I had been exceedingly good-natured in my treatment of them. They certainly do not deserve good usage at my hands after permitting me to be deliberately lied down--not merely once, but at two

several attacks--on two false indictments--without hardly a voice being raised on my behalf; and then sending one of the false witnesses to Congress, others to the Legislature, and choosing another as the mayor.

"I feel an infinite contempt for them--and probably have expressed more of it than I intended--for my preliminary chapter has caused the greatest uproar that has happened here since witch-times. If I escape from town without being tarred and feathered, I shall consider it good luck. I wish they would tar and feather me; it would be such an entirely novel kind of distinction for a literary man. And, from such judges as my fellow-citizens, I should look upon it as a higher honor than a laurel crown."

In that "infinite contempt" discernible beneath what Hawthorne, in his second preface, styled the "frank and genuine good-humor" of this chapter, he betrays, as occasionally in his later work, the warp of his recluse habits. He was not companionable. His mental attitude toward people whom he found distasteful was arrogant. He writes of his associates in the Custom-house as coolly as an entomologist might write of fossil insects. He had observed their sluggish age and incapacity with an amusement which he seems to think that they, and those who loved them, ought to share. That such a "set of wearisome old souls," such an old "animal" of an Inspector, had families, had feelings, had their own human pathos and sacredness, would appear not to have occurred to Hawthorne. In the course of a few months, they had become "but shadows" in his view, "white-headed and wrinkled images," which his fancy "used to sport with" and then "flung aside forever."

Mr. James hails this prefatory chapter as "one of the most perfect of Hawthorne's compositions, and one of the most gracefully and humorously autobiographic." Mr.

Lathrop is surprised that "its good-nature and harmless humor" should have "raised great ire in some of the Salem people, who recognized the sketches it contained of now forgotten officials." But Mr. Conway, at pains to note that the old Inspector was dead when The Scarlet Letter came out, and that Hawthorne "may not have known that he had left two daughters," does not fully approve, if only on artistic grounds, this deliberate portrayal of the old man's poverty of spirit. This biographer justifies the general tenor of the sketch as "the earliest exposure of the vicious 'spoils' system," which he considers an ingrain blemish of our "presidential monarchy."

What would have been cold-hearted cruelty in a man of the world comes with a different emphasis from a dreamer, hardly persuaded of reality even in his own little boy and girl. His journal for March, 1848, muses over Una and Julian, just gone to bed: "Thus ends the day of these two children,--one of them four years old, the other some months less than two. But the days and the years melt away so rapidly that I hardly know whether they are still little children at their parents' knees, or already a maiden and a youth, a woman and a man. This present life has hardly substance and tangibility enough to be the image of eternity. The future too soon becomes the present, which, before we can grasp it, looks back upon us as the past. It must, I think, be only the image of an image. Our next state of existence, we may hope, will be more real,--that is to say, it may be only one remove from a reality. But, as yet, we dwell in the shadow cast by time, which is itself the shadow cast by eternity." This is a familiar strain in Hawthorne's Note-Books, even so far back as 1837, when he jotted down: "On being transported to strange scenes, we feel as if all were unreal. This is but the perception of the true unreality of earthly things, made evident by the want of congruity between ourselves and them."

It is a relief to turn from the public aspects of Hawthorne's dismissal to the beautiful story of what it wrought in his intimate circle, where he is always without shadow of reproach.

When Hawthorne came home--not, apparently, on "that wintry day" mentioned in Mr. Conway's biography, but, as the published letters and journals demonstrate, on June 8, 1849--and said to his wife, "I am turned out of office," she bore it as he, going to her with the doomful telegram, had predicted that she would bear it, "like a woman--that is to say, better than a man." His troubled mind was already striving to beat out a new way to a livelihood, "some stated literary employment, in connection with a newspaper, or as corrector of the press to some printing establishment," "perhaps there may be some subordinate office connected with the Boston Athenæm," "writing a schoolbook--or, at any rate, a book for the young," but his wife met his tidings with a smile. "Oh, then, you can write your book "--not a schoolbook, but his book, the romance which, as she knew well, had long been haunting him. But where, he asked, were their bread and rice to come from, while he was writing. And then, in perhaps the proudest moment of her life, Mrs. Hawthorne opened a little drawer and displayed a pile of gold pieces, amounting to one hundred and fifty dollars, which she had miraculously saved out of the small weekly sum allotted her for household expenses. And while her husband still sat amazed before the unsuspected treasure, a gleam as of the Arabian Nights across his clouded way, she had slipped into his study, set out pen and ink and paper,--Mr. Conway will have it that she made a fire, too,--and that. very afternoon Hawthorne began The Scarlet Letter.

He had done very little writing since they had moved, three years before, to Salem. In the house on Herbert Street, "Castle Dismal," where Hawthorne had at first placed his wife and children under the same roof with his mother and sisters, he had been without a study, and separate quarters for the younger family on Chestnut Street proved still too narrow for such a luxury. But in the autumn of 1847 the two Hawthorne households made a united home on Mall Street, where an upper room was reserved for literature. The wife's exultation found expression in a letter to her mother: "My husband's study will be high from all noise, and it will be to me a Paradise of Peace to think of him alone and still, yet within my reach. He has now lived in the nursery a year without a chance for one hour's uninterrupted musing, and without his desk being once opened! He--the heaven-gifted Seer--to spend his life between the Custom House and the nursery!" In this retreat Hawthorne had written a few articles,--a review of Evangeline, The Snow Image, Main Street, Ethan Brand, The Great Stone Face, and he seems to have planned The Scarlet Letter as the principal tale in a volume somewhat akin to the Mosses.

The illness and death of his mother darkened those summer days, and the progress of the romance was interrupted, for while his wife kept the long, sad vigils by the sickbed, the care of the children devolved upon Hawthorne. Some of his most sensitive writing may be found in his July Journal, where he notes the strange mimicry of the two little ones, acting over together, as a new, fascinating play, the scenes of their grandmother's suffering and death. His close observation of Una, the leading spirit in these innocent dramatics, seems to have gone toward shaping his conception of Little Pearl. "There is something," he writes of Una, "that almost frightens me about the child--I know not whether elfish or angelic, but,

at all events, supernatural. She steps so boldly into the midst of everything, shrinks from nothing, has such a comprehension of everything, seems at times to have but little delicacy, and anon shows that she possesses the finest essence of it,--now so hard, now so tender; now so perfectly unreasonable, soon again so wise. In short, I now and then catch an aspect of her in which I cannot believe her to be my own human child, but a spirit strangely mingled with good and evil, haunting the house where I dwell. The little boy is always the same child, and never varies in his relation to me."

In the autumn Hawthorne, overworn by the trouble and grief of the summer, fell ill. The financial strain had become tense, but was relieved, in January, by a liberal check, whose amount had been quietly made up by a few friends. Their faith in both his genius and his character was well founded. To Hawthorne, proudest of a proud race, this timely aid was bitter as well as sweet. "The only way in which a man can retain his self-respect," he wrote in reply, "while availing himself of the generosity of his friends, is by making it an incitement to his utmost exertions, so that he may not need their help again."

During the unremitting brain toil of the next three and a half years,--years in which Hawthorne published three of his four romances, a new collection of tales, and his two chief books for children,--the sense of this obligation spurred him on, and he was scarcely installed in his Liverpool consulate before, " the miserable pinch" at last over, he sent back the full sum, with interest, to its donors.

Among the friends moved to seek Hawthorne out in the hour of his distress was the genial publisher, James T. Fields, who tells his own story too well for interruption:--