

Excerpt from *The Scarlet Letter*

1. The Prison Door

A THRONG of bearded men, in sad-colored garments and gray, steeple-crowned hats, intermixed with women, some wearing hoods, and others bareheaded, was assembled in front of a wooden edifice, the door of which was heavily timbered with oak, and studded with iron spikes. 1

The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison. In accordance with this rule, it may safely be assumed that the forefathers of Boston had built the first prison-house, somewhere in the vicinity of Cornhill, almost as seasonably as they marked out the first burial-ground, on Isaac Johnson's lot, and round about his grave, which subsequently became the nucleus of all the congregated sepulchres in the old church-yard of King's Chapel. Certain it is, that, some fifteen or twenty years after the settlement of the town, the wooden jail was already marked with weather-stains and other indications of age, which gave a yet darker aspect to its beetle-browed and gloomy front. The rust on the ponderous iron-work of its oaken door looked more antique than any thing else in the new world. Like all that pertains to crime, it seemed never to have known a youthful era. Before this ugly edifice, and between it and the wheel-track of the street, was a grass-plot, much overgrown with burdock, pig-weed, apple-peru, and such unsightly vegetation, which evidently found something congenial in the soil that had so early borne the black flower of civilized society, a prison. But, on one side of the portal, and rooted almost at the threshold, was a wild rose-bush, covered, in this month of June, with its delicate gems, which might be imagined to offer their fragrance and fragile beauty to the prisoner as he went in, and to the condemned criminal as he came forth to his doom, in token that the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to him. 2

This rose-bush, by a strange chance, has been kept alive in history; but whether it had merely survived out of the stern old wilderness, so long after the fall of the gigantic pines and oaks that originally overshadowed it,—or whether, as there is fair authority for believing, it had sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Ann Hutchinson, as she entered the prison-door,—we shall not take upon us to determine. Finding it so directly on the threshold of our narrative, which is now about to issue from that inauspicious portal, we could hardly do otherwise than pluck one of its flowers and present it to the reader. It may serve, let us hope, to symbolize some sweet moral blossom, that may be found along the track, or relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow. 3

The EXAMINATION Of SARAH GOOD



Sarah Good was one of the first to be accused of witchcraft by the circle of young girls in Salem. She was a likely witch in the eyes of many townspeople—an odd homeless woman who did not fit the Puritan mold.

The people of Salem were very familiar with Sarah Good. She often begged door-to-door with her children. If she were refused, she would walk away mumbling. Many claimed these “curses” were responsible for failed crops and death of livestock.

On March 1, 1692, Sarah Good faced examination with two other accused witches, Sarah Osburne and Tituba, Reverend Parris’s Caribbean slave. During the questioning, Ann Putnam, Betty Parris, and Abigail Williams shrieked and fell into fits. Sarah Good pleaded, “I am falsely accused,” but then Tituba named her as a witch. Several villagers—including her own husband—also testified against her, and Sarah was put in prison.

Then on March 24, Ann Putnam accused Sarah’s five-year-old daughter, Dorcas, of witchcraft. When examined, the imaginative young child confessed that she and her mother were witches. She showed the magistrates a red spot on her finger—most likely a flea bite—claiming it was from a snake her mother had given her. Little Dorcas was put in prison, chained to a wall.

Sarah Good was tried on June 30. Despite no evidence other than the claims of the afflicted girls, she was found guilty. She was one of five women to be hanged on July 19, 1692. Just before the hanging, the other women prayed and asked God to forgive the accusers, but Sarah Good showed no sign of forgiveness. Local minister Reverend Nicholas Noyes urged her to confess, announcing that she was indeed a witch. Sarah Good replied: “I am no more a witch than you are a wizard, and if you take away my life, God will give you blood to drink.”

Twenty-five years later, Reverend Noyes died of internal bleeding, choking on his own blood.

The examination of Sarah Good before the worshipful Assts John Hathorne, Jonathan Corwin.

HATHORNE: Sarah Good, what evil spirit have you familiarity with?

GOOD: None.

HATHORNE: Have you made no contract with the devil?

Good answered no.

HATHORNE: Why do you hurt these children?

GOOD: I do not hurt them. I scorn it.

HATHORNE: Who do you employ then to do it?

GOOD: No creature, but I am falsely accused.

HATHORNE: Why did you go away muttering from Mr. Parris, his house?

GOOD: I did not mutter but I thanked him for what he gave my child.

HATHORNE: Have you made no contract with the devil?

GOOD: No.

Hathorne desired the children, all of them, to look upon her, and see, if this were the person that had hurt them and so they all did look upon her and said this was one of the persons that did torment them--presently they were all tormented.

HATHORNE: Sarah Good, do you not see now what you have done? Why do you not tell us the truth? Why do you thus torment these poor children?

GOOD: I do not torment them.

HATHORNE: Who do you employ then?

GOOD: I employ nobody. I scorn it.

HATHORNE: How came they thus tormented?

GOOD: What do I know? You bring others here and now you charge me with it.

HATHORNE: Why? Who was it?

GOOD: I do not know, but it was some you brought into the meeting house with you.

HATHORNE: We brought you into the meeting house.

GOOD: But you brought in two more.

HATHORNE: Who was it then that tormented the children?

GOOD: It was Osburn.

HATHORNE: What is it that you say? When you go muttering away from persons houses?

GOOD: If I must tell I will tell.

HATHORNE: Do tell us then.

GOOD: If I must tell I will tell: it is the Commandments. I may say my Commandments, I hope.

HATHORNE: What Commandment is it?

GOOD: If I must tell you I will tell: it is a psalm.

HATHORNE: What psalm?

After a long time she muttered over some part of a psalm.

HATHORNE: Who do you serve?

GOOD: I serve God.

HATHORNE: What god do you serve?

GOOD: The god that made heaven and earth.

Though she was not willing to mention the word God her answers were in a very wicked, spiteful manner reflecting and retorting against the authority with base and abusive words and many lies. She was taken in. It was here said that her husband had said that he was afraid that she either was a witch or would be one very quickly. The worshipful Mr. Hathorne asked him his reason why he said so of her, whether he had ever seen anything by her. He answered no, not in this nature, but it was her bad [conduct] to him and indeed, said he, I may say with tears that she is an enemy to all good.

Salem Village, March the 1st 1691-92
Written by Ezekiell Chevers



Hawthorne's Moral Wilderness

Group Project (20 Points)

The narrator of *The Scarlet Letter* describes the story of Hester Prynne as “a tale of human frailty and sorrow,” suggesting that the unfortunate events retold here should evoke our pity—perhaps our empathy. However, these sentiments are not shared by the Puritan denizens of colonial Boston, who go to great lengths as a community to publicly disgrace the tragic heroine of this novel. Hawthorne's characters are veritable mysteries to our American sensibilities, multidimensional inventions that present moral enigmas to his readership; they have strengths and weaknesses, virtues and vices, assets and faults. In other words, they are all genuine human beings—flawed and fallible, yet strangely heroic and pitiable at the same time. So what is Hawthorne really trying to say about human nature in *The Scarlet Letter* by imbuing his novel's most prominent characters and symbols with rampant ambivalence? How does this ambiguity serve the message he is hoping to communicate in this story?

To better unravel Hawthorne's intent with *The Scarlet Letter*, you must administer an intensive examination of some of the novel's main characters and the symbols they are often associated or juxtaposed with. What insights or truths do Hawthorne's character portrayals and clever use of symbols reveal about human nature?

ASSIGNMENT: Your group must organize a 4 to 5-minute presentation that answers the above question as it relates to a specific character or symbol. Your presentation must be assembled using the Presentation format on your Google Docs and posted on the individual websites of each group member.

Requirements for CHARACTER presentations:

- What do they look like? How are their physical traits symbolic?
- What is their profession or role in society? What is their background?
- What positive and negative connotations do they evoke? How are they multidimensional characters that provoke both repulsion and sympathy; dichotic specimens of good and evil?
- Use specific evidence from the text to support your ideas. (Focus on action/behavior)

Requirements for SYMBOL presentations:

- How do you interpret these symbols? Are there multiple ways to interpret the symbols? (The answer is “yes,” by the way.)
- What role do these symbols play both literally and figuratively? How do they serve the author's thematic message?
- What characters (if any) are these symbols associated with?
- What chapters/passages do these symbols show up in?
- Use specific evidence from the text to support your ideas.

General requirements for ALL presentations:

- Must use presentation software to create a PowerPoint Presentation
- Must use visual aides and images
- Presentation must be posted on all group member's class websites
- “Share” your presentation with group members and Ms. Gerber (i.e., make access to PPT available for all respective members and your teacher)

CHARACTERS

Hester Prynne
Pearl
Arthur Dimmesdale

SYMBOLS

The Scarlet Letter “A”
Rosebush
The Meteor

Roger Chillingsworth

The Forest

Psychedelic Witches

Bewitching news this Halloween: A new study supports the theory that the women hanged as suspected witches in Salem in 1692 may have actually consumed a poisonous fungus similar to L.S.D.¹

The fungus called *ergot* grows on rye in cold damp weather and when eaten brings on behavior often attributed to witches, such as convulsions and hallucinations. Victims of *ergot* poisoning may also experience a tingling that ants are crawling under the skin, a coldness on the extremities and spasms of limb, tongue, and fascia muscles.

University of Maryland historian Mary Matossian studied court transcripts, climate indicators, and diaries of the 1692 witchcraft incidents. Rye bread was a dietary staple of the day and Matossian found that the Rye crop around that time was particularly vulnerable to *ergot*. After examining grasses and tree rings, she discovered that the growing season in Eastern New England was normally cold in 1690, 91, and 92. And diaries showed that the households most often stricken by “bewitchment” were closer to marshland.

The modern day hallucinogen L.S.D. is a chemical derivative of *ergot*.

“Memories of Hawthorne Haunt Streets of Salem 300 Years After Witch Trials—Massachusetts Town Is Up to Its Seven Gables in American History”

JAMES F. LEE | *Los Angeles Times* | 18 October 1992

SALEM, Mass. — When I was about 11 years old, an old lady pulled up in a car near the Salem Common, where I was playing, rolled down her window and said in a Southern accent, “Do you know Hester Prynne?”

“What?” I eyed her suspiciously. Was this what my parents meant when they said to beware of strangers?

“Hester Prynne,” she repeated, making the name two syllables: Pree-in. “Do you know her?” There was a mischievous glint in her eye.

“Sorry, lady, I don’t,” I said, edging away.

“Then, young man, you should be better read!” And off she drove.

¹ **L.S.D.:** lysergic acid diethylamide; a synthetic crystalline compound that is a potent hallucinogenic drug

That's how tourists visiting Salem were in those days--a literate bunch, and a little odd, too. They knew their Nathaniel Hawthorne, and expected young Salem boys to know the heroine of Hawthorne's novel, "The Scarlet Letter."

I miss those days, and those kinds of tourists. Visitors still come in droves to this small city of 38,000, 15 miles north of Boston, but most of them not for Hester Prynne's sake, or to see Hawthorne's birthplace. They come for witches.

Witches have always been big here. The high school football team is the Fighting Witches ("W-I-T-C-H-E-S! Rah! Rah! Rah!") and the city's official logo--a witch riding on a broomstick--adorns every police car and is embossed on my high school ring. By far the biggest tourist attraction in Salem is the Witch Museum on Washington Square, which presents a rather melodramatic multimedia re-creation of the witch hysteria of the late 17th Century. Other popular sites include the Salem Witch Dungeon, with live re-enactments of the trials, and the new Salem Witch Trial Memorial, dedicated in August by Nobel Peace Prize recipient Elie Wiesel.

The hoopla reached a crescendo this year: the 300th anniversary of the infamous Salem Witch Trials, in which 19 people were put to death on charges of practicing witchcraft. (Contrary to popular belief, 18 were hanged and one crushed; none were burned at the stake.) All 19 were accused by a group of hysterical, and some say bored, adolescent girls. But the event has remained part of the American psyche, a fascinating stain that has popped up in fiction, movies and drama with a strange obstinacy. It has even become part of our political vocabulary, as in "witch hunt."

Beginning Friday, a 10-day festival called Haunted Happenings will feature parties at local hotels, plays about the witch trials, street fairs, dances, music celebrations, costume balls and psychic readers. But the festivities will have a serious side as well: They will include a major exhibition at the Essex Institute called "Days of Judgment: The Salem Witch Trials of 1692," in which a tour guide will take visitors through the past, discussing the social and political forces that combined to result in the trials. The exhibition runs through Nov. 29.

Salem is more than witches, though, as those kids who were asked dumb questions about Nathaniel Hawthorne know. The city claims an important literary legacy as birthplace of one of the most influential American authors of the 19th Century. Salem's bloody history served as inspiration for his two most important novels: *The House of the Seven Gables* and *The Scarlet Letter*.

Despite Salem's influence on Hawthorne, Salemites have a right to be skittish about honoring him. He didn't like his hometown, and made no secret of the fact. He was mortified by the Witch Trials and the role played by his ancestor, Col. John Hathorne, one of the Trials' judges, calling the episode "a hideous epoch." And he railed against Salem's stodgy parochialism as the town settled into sleepy tranquility in the 1820s and 1830s, after Salem ceased to be significant as a port.

"Salem is my dwelling place," he wrote disparagingly. Yet off and on for 37 of his 60 years, from his birth in 1804 until his final departure from the town in 1849, he lived in Salem, obsessed by its past, wishing to escape its present.

Upon my recent visit to my hometown, I discovered that despite the author's ambivalent relations with his birthplace, Salem can offer an astounding wealth of Hawthorne memorabilia to serious students, or to casual visitors who may want a break from the relentless Witch Trial hoopla.

What can the visitor see? First, there is the House of the Seven Gables itself (there are actually eight gables), the mansion that served as the inspiration for the novel. Built in 1668, it is a marvelous example of 17th-Century architecture, with steeply pitched overhanging roofs and black clapboards. Located at the foot of Turner Street right on Salem Harbor, the house is officially known as the Turner-Ingersoll House, but the locals call it the Gables. When he was a young man, Hawthorne frequently visited his cousin, Susannah Ingersoll, who lived there. During Hawthorne's time, the house had only five gables; the others had been removed during the many alterations the house had undergone.

Today the exterior looks much as it did in the 18th Century, with all gables intact and large framed windows replacing the original casement windows. It's a brooding, melancholy edifice with clapboards that ". . . grew black in the prevalent east-wind . . ." and had "a meditative look," as Hawthorne wrote in the novel.

Inside, though, the low ceilings, brightly painted and papered rooms, and large windows that overlook the garden and the sea beyond, offer a cheery contrast to the rather gloomy exterior.

Six rooms are open to the public. With the exception of the 17th-Century kitchen, they are furnished with period pieces from the 1830s and '40s, when Hawthorne was visiting the place. Many of the furnishings are originals that belonged to Susannah Ingersoll. Of particular interest to Hawthorne enthusiasts is the serpentine-front desk that is believed to have been used by the author.

Perhaps the most interesting feature in the house is the secret stairway, a twisting flight of steps built inside one of the house's large chimneys around the time of the Witch Trials. It was forgotten for over a century and only rediscovered in the 1880s. Its original purpose a mystery, the stairway was removed during remodeling; this one is a replica.

Those wishing to know more about Hawthorne's literary life can visit Salem's Essex Institute on Essex Street. The institute houses the world's largest collection of Hawthorniana--more than 10,000 pieces, comprising every edition of Hawthorne's works and every edition in which his works have been reviewed. Also included are correspondence between the author and his literary contemporaries, among them Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Herman Melville, and letters written to family members. There are many images of Hawthorne, including Charles Osgood's 1840 oil portrait, the most famous likeness of the author.

Another way to "complete" a Hawthorne visit is to see the place he worked from 1846 to 1849, the Salem Custom House, operated today by the National Park Service as part of the Salem Maritime National Historic Site. The historic site maintains a nine-acre park that includes Derby Wharf, Salem's busiest during its 19th-Century heyday as a trading port, and several buildings of historic importance. All buildings are open to the public free of charge; a small visitor center provides information about Salem and surrounding areas.

As surveyor of the port of Salem, a political job he got through his connections with President Franklin Pierce--a Democrat and classmate at Bowdoin College in Maine--Hawthorne spent much time in the Custom House. Built in 1819, it is an imposing two-story, red-brick, Federalist structure on Derby Street, dominated by a double row of white pillars that support an elegantly carved balustrade. On the roof, a wood-carved golden eagle with outstretched wings keeps watch over the harbor, which today sees a steady flow of small-boat traffic . . . but no large vessels.

The sparsely furnished room where Hawthorne labored is on the first floor and offers a sweeping view of Derby Wharf and Salem Harbor. Visitors can see such Hawthorne artifacts as his pen and his scales (used

to weigh cargoes). The remaining rooms open to the public are decorated in the opulent style of the 1870s and 1880s, and are the original furnishings provided by Custom House officials from that period.

Hawthorne lost his job at the Custom House when administrations changed in Washington and he was forced to look elsewhere for work. Ironically, this commenced the most productive period of his literary life; shortly after his dismissal he published "The Scarlet Letter."

All of the Salem houses in which Hawthorne lived remain standing. The Hawthorne Birthplace, moved to the grounds of the House of the Seven Gables from its original location on Union Street, is a notable example of a mid-18th-Century, wood-frame house. The author was born here on July 4, 1804. A 2 1/2-story structure with gambrel roof dominated by a large central chimney, it was a typical residence for Salem's working families of Hawthorne's time, and shows the humble beginnings of the author. Unlike the gaily papered Gables, the birthplace's walls are whitewashed with reddish-brown and blue paneling, reflecting a somber Puritan influence.

Other Hawthorne residences are not open to the public. The author lived for the better part of 30 years at 10 1/2 Herbert St., one street over from Union; this was the home of his mother's family, the Mannings, and was the place where he wrote his first novel, "Fanshawe," and "Twice Told Tales."

I myself used to live in the former Hawthorne residence at 14 Mall St., near Salem Common. This was Hawthorne's home during most of his Custom House years, and was where he wrote "The Scarlet Letter." My family lived on the second floor, where Hawthorne's mother and sisters lived. The author and his wife and children lived on the first floor; his study was on the third floor.

Hawthorne lived briefly on Chestnut Street, the most elegant street in Salem, lined with exquisite Federalist mansions. The house, No. 8, where he lived in 1847 just after his appointment as surveyor, is a three-story, wood-framed structure; it was built before 1800 and is reputed to be the oldest residence on Chestnut Street. Despite its location, the house proved too small for Hawthorne's growing family (he and his wife, Sophia, had three children), so he moved to Mall Street.

After losing his surveyor's job, Hawthorne left Salem for good. Although he never returned after 1849 and lies buried in Concord, Mass., his mark on the city is indelible. Any visitor to Salem, even one with only the most passing interest in the author, will find a fascinating trove of Hawthorne lore in the Witch City.

And a certain Southern woman would be glad to know that I have made my acquaintance with Hester Prynne.

Deconstructing Hawthorne’s “Tale of Human Frailty and Sorrow”: Transforming Motifs into Themes

DIRECTIONS: A **motif** is any reoccurring character, incident, or idea in literature, such as a hero saving a damsel in distress. As a literary device, motifs are used to communicate themes. **Themes** are the universal truths and messages of a literary work. A theme is a thought or opinion the author presents to the reader that may be deep, difficult to understand, or even moralistic. Use the **motifs** provided below to extrapolate **themes** that Nathaniel Hawthorne might be trying to communicate in *The Scarlet Letter*. Be sure to use textual evidence to support your theme.

1. Suffering, Punishment, and Redemption

Thematic Statement:

Explanation:

2. Night vs. Day

Thematic Statement:

Explanation:

3. Civilization vs. the Wilderness

Thematic Statement:

Explanation:

4. Individual vs. Society

Thematic Statement:

Explanation:

5. The effects of sin

Thematic Statement:

Explanation:

6. Intolerance and refusal to forgive

Thematic Statement:

Explanation:

7. Obsession for revenge

Thematic Statement:

Explanation:

8. The effects of guilt

Thematic Statement:

Explanation: