

Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne

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Literary Significance and Narrative Foundations of The Scarlet Letter

The Scarlet Letter is a magnum opus of the American writer [Nathaniel Hawthorne](#). Published in Boston in 1850, it has been considered one of the cornerstones of American literature. This was the first American novel, which caused a wide resonance in Europe. A native of Salem, Hawthorne revives the way of life and the moral image of his ancestors, the Puritans of the mid-17th century, in the book. Questions of intolerance, sin, repentance, and grace are at the center of his attention.

The main character is Esther Prin and in the absence of her husband, she conceived and gave birth to a girl. Since it is not known whether the husband is alive, the sanctimonious townspeople expose her to relatively light exponential punishment for possible adultery she is put to shameful posts and must wear the letter A (abbreviated from adultery) embroidered with scarlet thread on clothing for the rest of her life. For her husband, who returned to New England at the time of the civil execution of Esther, the main crime of the wife is her refusal to give the name of the father of the child (Hawthorne 155-475).

The true crown of the works of Hawthorne, in which principles of romance writers significantly transformed and enriched the tradition, creating new versions of narrative structures were transformed into artistic matter in the novel *The Scarlet Letter*. The *Scarlet Letter* is simpler and more complete than other novels, with great perfection achieved sets a goal, and is marked by a difficulty-defined charm that can be found in the artist's work when he first reached its peak – a kind of directness and naturalness of incarnation, oblivion of its reader and fresh interest in the topic (Hawthorne 155-475).

Historical Sources and the Representation of Puritan Society

The story that was based on the novel was taken by Hawthorne long before his writing. For the first time, a woman with a *scarlet letter* on her chest appears in the story *Endicott and the Red Cross*, where she appears as one of the background characters. It is mentioned in his notebooks. One of the records of 1844 has a direct bearing on the future novel: The life of a woman, whom the old law condemned as a sign of the adultery she committed, to wear the letter A sewn on clothes. She became the heroine of the novel, Esther Prin. The diary entry of October 27, 1841, symbolizes the

moral or spiritual malady corporally so when a person commits a sin, it can lead to the appearance of an ulcer on his body.

The action of the novel is related to the past and occurs in New England in the era of the first settlements. However, the haze of time, thrown at his events and separating them from the present, was not intended by Hawthorne to create an idyllic picture. In working with historical material, the writer abandoned the approach to history that developed in Romanticism, which determined the significance of his artistic achievements (Hawthorne 155-475). In romanticism, the past is the antithesis of the unacceptable for either the hero or the author of the present. One might even say that, when referring to history, the novelist of the novel did something similar to the flight of a romantic hero. Illuminated by an iridescent aura of fantasy, explicitly and implicitly endowed with positive traits that are deprived of the surrounding reality, the past was a striking contrast to the present and often served as the embodiment of the social, ethical, or aesthetic ideal of the author, willingly or unwillingly inclined to his romantic idealization. It could be expressed by depicting the past as the golden age, the new Arcadia, medieval freemasonry, the motifs of a pastoral or fairy tale, etc. These tasks were also met by the aesthetics of the past when past epochs were portrayed as the realm of beauty and harmony.

Against the background of the traditional romantic historical narrative, *The Scarlet Letter* is distinguished precisely by the complete absence of the idealization of the past, a characteristic, as you can see, of the novelist Hawthorne. Settled in relation to him very critically, the writer is not inclined to turn a blind eye to those pages of history that are worthy of condemnation, which strengthens the impression of the author's objectivity as opposed to the romanticism stated in the subjectivity of the narrative. Hawthorne achieves this complex effect by using a whole arsenal of artistic techniques that enriched his artistic palette, blossoming it with new bright colors (Hawthorne 155-475).

Documentary Framing and The Custom-House

Among these methods are, in particular, insistent references to the primary source of the novel, which seems to be merely the processing of genuine notes by a certain customs guard, Mr. Pugh. At one time it was a fairly common method, which was often used by Horner before, if the authors believe, most of the works were manuscripts found in a bottle in an old chest, and also inherited from relatives or acquaintances. For greater persuasiveness, Hawthorne also introduces material evidence – a scrap of scarlet matter, which turned out to be a real *scarlet letter*. The materiality of this miraculously preserved relic of the past is intended to strengthen the reader in the idea that he is expected to get acquainted not with a fictional but with a genuine history.

The role of the context in which these facts are presented is also significant. The *Scarlet Letter* is opened not with a traditional preface explaining the author's intentions and informing about the strange circumstances under which the manuscript was found. The text of the novel is preceded by a

detailed autobiographical essay dedicated to the service of Hawthorne in customs in the years preceding the writing of the novel. The portraits of fellow servicemen performed with nature, the undeniable authenticity of the [biographical information](#), the tone of the narrative in the Customs, then the trust, then the sarcastic, the good-naturedly mocking, sometimes caustic-caustic, then painted with mild irony, also enhance the objectivity of the sound of the work, tuning to the perception of the events of the novel as genuine.

Objectivity, Subjectivity, and Narrative Contrast

The original combination of the desire for objectivity as the author's intention and the subjective orientation laid down in the genres of romantic prose, addressed by Hawthorne, allows us to speak of dialecticism as the most pronounced trait of his artistic thinking that conditioned the unique uniqueness of his artistic vision. However, the writer was not always successful with equal success to resolve this contradiction. Nowhere in Hawthorne is this combination of opposing trends embodied in such a perfect, harmonious, and natural form as in the *Scarlet Letter* (Hawthorne 155-475).

The contrast between the introductory essay and the text of the *Scarlet Letter* itself is so striking that it seems that the author intentionally set himself the goal of writing about what leads him away. The main text is immersed in history, draws the life of the Puritan community, and is focused on complex moral and philosophical questions. It is submitted in an analytical key and a gloomy tone with a touch of solemnly ominous grandeur. The Customs sets the tone of the present, sometimes burning urgency. Portraits of contemporaries-colleagues, whose lives are so primitive, and their needs are so vital, that the question of the moral foundations of such an existence can be put only in a negative form, in turn, constitute a contrast to autobiographical motives designed to highlight the absolute incompatibility of the author and his environment, leading to the full extinction of his creative impulses. At the same time, both lines of this strange introduction are combined by a game element inclined to a phantasmagoric grotesque.

Romance, Imagination, and Hawthorne's Genre

Perhaps, at least in part, such a visible descent of these texts is due to a change in the initial [design in the course of work on the book](#) (Hawthorne 155-475). Unexpectedly for the author, who originally intended to publish another novelistic collection, The *Scarlet Letter* voluntarily grew up and ousted from the volume the other stories intended for him. The work went so fast that in the Customs, written shortly before the end of the novel, there were references to one of them, Main Street. Without knowing it, Hawthorne, as it were, foresaw the advice of DG Lawrence, who resolutely insisted three-quarters of a century later: Never trust an artist. Trust the story itself (tale). Subordinated to the higher logic of artistic creation, Hawthorne allowed his *Scarlet Letter* to throw out with him in essence what, according to Pushkin, his Tatyana threw out with him.

Hawthorne defined the genre of the *Scarlet Letter* as a romantic novel (romance), first resorting to this designation in the story May Pole (the word romance is used in this work in relation to all four of his large-scale works, not as opposed to the author's definition, as it is often found in [American criticism](#) – the word *romantic* is omitted only for the sake of brevity). The famous and often quoted pages of the introductory essay contain an opposition between two genre varieties of the novel – realistic and romantic. Until recently, it was customary to understand the writer's arguments too literally in the theoretical and personal (in relation to his own creativity) plan. They directly trusted the direct expression of his literary and aesthetic views. Separate statements, especially with regard to the romantic narrative, were considered almost as formulations of laws (Hawthorne 155-475).

It should be added that, while reflecting on this essay on imagination, Hawthorne basically speaks of two different things, implying not only the romantic imagination that Coleridge wrote about, but also the creative imagination that lies in the nature of all art. Everything is complicated by the fact that both these meanings are sometimes combined within one statement, which, in fact, has gone unnoticed by criticism. So, in the famous passage that a person who is not able to dream of strange things and make them look like truth, there is nothing to try and write a romantic novel (9, p. 45), his first some really gravitate towards a romantic novel, while the second has a broader meaning, echoing Shakespeare's words lies like truth.

Works Cited

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. "The Scarlet Letter and Other Writings : Authoritative Texts, Contexts, Criticism." *A Norton Critical Edition*, 2005.