Nathaniel Hawthorne’s
THE SCARLET LETTER

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Biography of Nathaniel Hawthorne

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born in Salem, Massachusetts on July 4, 1804. His father died when he was only four years old, and Nathaniel grew up with his mother and sisters in Salem and Raymond, Maine.

In 1821, he began studying at Bowdoin College, where he was a self-admittedly lazy and rebellious student. While Hawthorne was frequently fined for gambling, and resentful of the mandatory early morning religious services, during his Bowdoin years he fostered a number of meaningful and important friendships—perhaps most notably with Franklin Pierce, who went on to become the 14th President of the United States.

After graduating in 1825, Hawthorne served as editor for the American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge for three years. Hawthorne later took a job as a measurer at the Boston Custom House in 1839, where he tallied the quantities of foreign imports. A longtime bachelor, due in part to his reclusive nature, Hawthorne found his match in the illustrator and transcendentalist, Sophia Peabody. They were married on July 9, 1842. During their courtship, in 1841, Hawthorne began working at the Brook Farm in West Roxbury, Massachusetts—a transcendentalist Utopian community founded as an experiment in communal living, where participants sought a life of balance between menial work and intellectual pursuit. Despite his initial enthusiasm, Nathaniel ultimately found the work to be so exhausting that it left him with no time or energy to write. After five months he left the commune and began searching for new work.

In 1842, the newly married Hawthorne couple moved into The Old Manse in Concord, Massachusetts.
This marked the start of a whirlwind of creativity for Hawthorne, during which he wrote the twenty-one short tales that comprised his first published volume, *Twice Told Tales*. While at the Manse in Concord, Hawthorne became a part of the intellectual community there, one that included the likes of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller.

In 1844, Sophia gave birth to their first child, Una. Unable to provide for his family with his writing, Hawthorne sought out a higher paying job, eventually taking up employment at the Salem Custom House until Zachary Taylor was elected in 1849. Taylor, a member of the Whig Party, replaced Hawthorne, a Democrat, with one of his own supporters. Hawthorne, now bitter and with plenty of time on his hands, immediately began work on what would become *The Scarlet Letter*. This marked the start of another of his creative periods, during which he wrote *The House of Seven Gables* (1851) and *The Blithedale Romance* (1852). The books were hailed instantly as important works by the academic community, putting Hawthorne on the critical map, but they never became best-sellers. Whereas Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) sold over 300,000 copies in its first year, *The House of Seven Gables* sold a paltry 6,710 in the same period.

Hawthorne, in dire need of a bigger salary than his poor book sales could afford him, wrote the biography of his old friend Franklin Pierce prior to his election in 1852, which ultimately curried enough favor with the new President to secure Hawthorne the position of American Consul to Liverpool, Hawthorne’s highest-paying job, in 1853. As had previously been the case, when Hawthorne was working he found himself unable to write, but he was able to save enough money to support his family. As he lived in Italy during his tenure as Consul, he collected notes and sketches that would later become *The Marble Faun*, his final novel.

In 1860, Nathaniel and his wife retired to Concord, but despite the period of rest he wrote very little apart from occasional magazine and editorial pieces. On May 19, 1864, while on a tour with Pierce in Plymouth, New Hampshire, Hawthorne died in his sleep. His funeral was held on May 21st, and today he remains buried in Sleepy Hollow on what is known as Author’s Hill.

Puritanical Punishment: An American Legacy

“The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognised 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.”

So begins Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, a dark critique of the Puritan utopia’s cynical view of human nature. The Puritans were religious refugees who came to the new world to escape religious persecution in England and practice their own brand of Protestantism. Their religion, influenced by Calvinism, taught that, upon birth, every child was either saved or damned; this is called pre-destination. This meant that “supernatural grace,” God’s gift of salvation and life everlasting, was not dependent on the acts of the worshipper. Often religious tests were employed to determine whether one was chosen or fallen, not unlike the testing that Governor Bellingham and Reverend Wilson administer to Pearl, Hester’s illegitimate daughter. During this passage they look for some sign that Pearl is saved—a sign she should be taken from her mother to prevent her from being spoiled by Hester, whom they regard as a fallen woman.

In Puritan theory, sins were divided into public and private. Private sins were those that were between the penitent and God, best resolved by prayer. Public sins were sins that affected the social fabric of the Puritan colony – these included blasphemy, drunkenness, and even swearing. All public sins were punished through rituals of public shame. A popular form of punishment for Puritan elders was branding, a method of marking the criminal with their crime for life. For instance, hot irons with the letters AD were pressed into the hands or cheeks of adulterers as a permanent mark upon their body that they could never remove. While Hester’s scarlet letter was made of cloth and not blood, it is worthy of note that the ministers are very concerned with ensuring her marking as sinner is permanent. It is Dimmesdale that convinces Wilson and Bellingham to allow Hester to keep her child, not out of mercy,
but because Pearl operates as a permanent reminder of Hester’s sin, for which she would be ostracized.

Many historians have remarked upon the impact Puritan thought has had upon the American prison system; replace the word “sin” with “crime,” and the Puritan philosophy still stands. While other nations have systems built upon the ideal of rehabilitation, the United States, influenced by its Puritan past, enforces penitence through hard labor. Today, many states have re-instigated policies reflective of earlier “chain gang” rhetoric, whereby prisoners were used for often back-breaking labor under the premise that it was the best method of atonement for their crimes. We often hear politicians refer to prisoners needing to “repay their debt to society.” This language reinforces what historian Brian Jarvis notes as “a wholesale rejection of rehabilitative ideals and a return to a profoundly Puritanical insistence on punishment as retribution.”

When a person commits theft, they become “a thief.” They are no longer a person, but rather become the crime they have committed.

Some would say a modern version of the scarlet letter Hester is forced to wear currently exists on every job application in the United States, in the form of a box that felons are asked to check to notify their potential employer about their past convictions. Many activists, most notably supporters of the “Ban the Box” campaign, consider this a method of stigmatizing criminals even after their sentence has passed, since they are required to report this information for the rest of their lives. In this way, the legacy of Puritan punishment, the same legacy Hawthorne criticizes in his novel, can still be witnessed in the United States today.

Sources:
Politics As Usual

Henry David Thoreau was one of the leading American Transcendentalist philosophers, but beyond that, he was also one of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s friends and inspirations. Hawthorne admired Thoreau for his dedication to self-reliance. His diaries are littered with praise for the quiet, introspective man with whom he enjoyed ice skating in the winter and rowing in the summers of Concord.

It is not unreasonable, then, to assume that Hawthorne had read Civil Disobedience, published in 1849, when he began writing The Scarlet Letter, a searing critique of a hypocritical theocracy and its unjust laws. Civil Disobedience was Thoreau’s treatise on man’s relationship with government, one that Thoreau characterized as antagonistic. In it, he advocated for a method by which moral objectors who felt that laws were unjust could protest the government that had made them, in his mind, into machines. “It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right,” he wrote, continuing “the only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right.”

One of Thoreau’s primary reasons for objecting to government practices was the institution of slavery. Thoreau, an abolitionist, avidly believed that slavery was a moral wrong, and that any government that supported it was, by its nature, unjust. He noted this when he wrote that “I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as my government which is the slave’s government also.” As a result he refused to pay his poll tax because he refused to contribute money to a government he didn’t believe had the moral authority to demand his support. As a result, he was imprisoned for a short time.

It is no coincidence, then, that Hawthorne’s heroine, Hester, rebels against an oppressive culture that denies her humanity. She disagrees with their moral authority and civilly disobeys. She refuses to give up her co-adulterer, though she is promised it might lessen her sentence. She refuses to wear the scarlet letter in shame, instead embroidering it beautifully, an act of quiet protest. Hester acts by her own moral code, and, as was the case with Thoreau, this dooms her to be an outcast. In The Scarlet Letter, Hawthorne takes a lesson from Thoreau in arguing that the only way to live independently, and by one’s own morality, is to live outside of society.

Classic Repertory Company Production

As with any adaptation, our production of *The Scarlet Letter* will not be a word-for-word recreation of the novel. Our company of actors, designers and directors worked together to create a 60 minute interpretation for the stage that distills the essence of the story. We have our own unique group of actors who have their own ideas and interpretations of the play. Because we have a cast of six actors, you’ll see each person playing multiple characters. Be aware of how the actors use props, costumes and their bodies to become someone new. We take our shows on the road to venues of all sizes, which means our set needs to be light and mobile. We have lots of musicians in our cast, so we like to use live music. Our actors are recent college graduates, which means some of them will play characters much older than themselves, and some of them will play characters half their age. All of these things make our production unique, in the hopes of offering you a new way to experience the story. We look forward to talking with you after the show, and hearing about your experience!

Post Show Questions

1. Select a moment from the play or novel that you found particularly moving. What makes it so effective? What devices does the author use to captivate you?
2. Now that you have seen the play performed rather than read, how have your opinions changed about the story, characters, or themes?

Writing Prompt

1. Look through your local newspapers or online for theatre reviews. Read a few, then write your own review of Classic Repertory Company’s *The Scarlet Letter*. Think about what parts of the show you enjoyed, what parts you didn’t understand, how the performers embodied the characters, and whether any production elements hindered or enhanced the telling of the story. Feel free to send the review over to us when you’re done!