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Introduction

By Joseph Pearce

The Victorian age (1837-1901) was a golden age of literature and especially the golden age of the novel. We think perhaps of the works of Dickens, the Brontë sisters, Elizabeth Gaskell, Thackeray, Trollope, Thomas Hardy, and George Eliot (the great Jane Austen belongs to the pre-Victorian period). Simultaneously, across the Atlantic, we find the golden age of the Great American Novel. The first of these, if we set aside *The Last of the Mohicans* by James Fenimore Cooper (1826) as lacking the necessary literary "greatness," was Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, a truly pioneering work. Published in 1850, a year before Melville's *Moby Dick* and two years ahead of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, it blazed a trail ahead of later literary classics such as *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott (1868), *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James (1881), *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain (1884), and *The Red Badge of Courage* by Stephen Crane (1895). It is, therefore, not merely one of the truly canonical works of American literature but is also preeminent in terms of its historical importance as an influence on what followed.

Henry James, himself one of the great American novelists, wrote a book on Hawthorne, published in 1879, in which he was effusive in his praise of *The Scarlet Letter*, declaring it to be "Hawthorne's masterpiece":

> *The Scarlet Letter* contains little enough of gaiety or of hopefulness. It is densely dark, with a single spot of vivid colour in it; and it will probably long remain the most consistently gloomy of English novels of the first order. But I just now called it the author's masterpiece, and I imagine it will continue to be, for



Preface to the Second Edition

MUCH to the author's surprise, and (if he may say so without additional offence) considerably to his amusement, he finds that his sketch of official life, introductory to The Scarlet Letter, has created an unprecedented excitement in the respectable community immediately around him. It could hardly have been more violent, indeed, had he burned down the Custom-House, and quenched its last smoking ember in the blood of a certain venerable personage, against whom he is supposed to cherish a peculiar malevolence. As the public disapprobation would weigh very heavily on him, were he conscious of deserving it, the author begs leave to say, that he has carefully read over the introductory pages, with a purpose to alter or expunge whatever might be found amiss, and to make the best reparation in his power for the atrocities of which he has been adjudged guilty. But it appears to him, that the only remarkable features of the sketch are its frank and genuine good-humor, and the general accuracy with which he has conveyed his sincere impressions of the characters therein described. As to enmity, or ill-feeling of any kind, personal or political, he utterly disclaims such motives. The sketch might, perhaps, have been wholly omitted, without loss to the public, or detriment to the book; but, having undertaken to write it,



THE CUSTOM-HOUSE

INTRODUCTORY TO "THE SCARLET LETTER"

IT is a little remarkable, that—though disinclined to talk overmuch of myself and my affairs at the fireside, and to my personal friends—an autobiographical impulse should twice in my life have taken possession of me, in addressing the public. The first time was three or four years since, when I favored the reader—inexcusably, and for no earthly reason, that either the indulgent reader or the intrusive author could imagine—with a description of my way of life in the deep quietude of an Old Manse.[1] And now—because, beyond my deserts, I was happy enough to find a listener or two on the former occasion—I again seize the public by the button, and talk of my three years' experience in a Custom-House. The example of the famous "P. P., Clerk of this Parish," was never more faithfully followed. The truth seems to be, however, that, when he casts his leaves

[1] The home in Concord, Massachusetts, where Hawthorne and his wife lived from 1842 to 1845, when they moved to Salem. Hawthorne's short story collection, *Mosses from an Old Manse*, was published in 1846.

CHAPTER I

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.

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,[1] and round about his grave, which subsequently became the nucleus of all the congregated sepulchres in the old churchyard of King's Chapel.[2] Certain it is, that, some fifteen or

[1] Isaac Johnson died a few months after arriving in Massachusetts with hundreds of other Puritans in 1630.

[2] the first Anglican church in New England, established in 1686

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 anything 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, pigweed, 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.

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,[3] 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.

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[3] A religious critic of the Puritans, Anne Hutchinson was banished from Massachusetts in 1638.