

50 CRITICS DISCUSS

The Scarlet Letter (1850)

Nathaniel Hawthorne

(1804-1864)

“*The Scarlet Letter* is a psychological romance.... Mr. Hawthorne has, in fine, shown extraordinary power in this volume, great feeling and discrimination, a subtle knowledge of character in its secret springs and outer manifestations. He blends, too, a delicate fancy with this metaphysical insight.... The atmosphere of the piece also is perfect. It has the mystic element, the weird forest influences of the old Puritan discipline and era.... We hardly know another writer who has lived among the new school who would have handled this delicate subject without an infusion of George Sand.”

Everet A. Duyckinck
New York *Literary World* 6
(30 March 1850) 323-25

“This is a most powerful but painful story. Mr. Hawthorne must be well known to our readers as a favourite with the *Athenaeum*. We rate him as among the most original and peculiar writers of American fiction. There is in his work a mixture of Puritan reserve and wild imagination, of passion and description, of the allegorical and the real, which some will fail to understand, and which others will positively reject--but which, to ourselves, is fascinating, and which entitles him to be placed on a level with Brockden Brown and the author of ‘Rip Van Winkle’... We recollect no tale dealing with crime so sad and revenge so subtly diabolical, that is at the same time so clear of fever and of prurient excitement.... We are by no means satisfied that passions and tragedies like these are the legitimate subjects for fiction... But if Sin and Sorrow in their most fearful forms are to be presented in any work of art, they have rarely been treated with a loftier severity, purity, and sympathy than in Mr. Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter*.”

Henry F. Chorley
London *Athenaeum* 1181
(15 June 1850) 634

“The scarlet letter was a poor type of the awful truth which she carried within her heart. Without deceit before the world, she stands forth the most heroic person in all that drama.... How far behind her in moral and religious excellence was the accredited religious teacher, who was her companion in guilt!”

George Bailey Loring
Massachusetts Quarterly Review 3
(30 September 1850) 484-500

“Why has our author selected such a theme? Why...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 undertide 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.... We honestly believe that *The Scarlet Letter* has already done not a little to degrade our literature, and to encourage social licentiousness... The romance never hints the shocking words that belong to its things, but, like Mephistopheles, insinuates that the arch-fiend himself is a very tolerable sort of person, if nobody would call him Mr. Devil.... 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.... 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.”

Arthur Cleveland Coxe
“The Writings of Hawthorne”

“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 other generations than ours, his most substantial title to fame.... The book was the finest piece of imaginative writing yet put forth in the country.... It is beautiful, admirable, extraordinary; it has in the highest degree that merit which I have spoken of as the mark of Hawthorne’s best things--an indefinable purity and lightness of conception...

The faults of the book are, to my sense, a want of reality and an abuse of the fanciful element--of a certain superficial symbolism.... In *The Scarlet Letter* there is a great deal of symbolism; there is, I think, too much.... I had not meant, however, to expatiate upon his defects, which are of the slenderest and most venial kind. *The Scarlet Letter* has the beauty and harmony of all original and complete conceptions, and its weaker spots, whatever they are, are not of its essence; they are mere light flaws and inequalities of surface. One can often return to it; it supports familiarity, and has the inexhaustible charm and mystery of great works of art. It is admirably written.”

Henry James
Hawthorne
(London 1879) 87-92

“From Hawthorne we could not have obtained that weird, mysterious, thrilling charm with which he has awed and delighted us had he not allowed his mind to revel in one direction, so as to lose its fair proportions. I have been specially driven to think of this by the strong divergence between Hawthorne and myself.... His is a mixture of romance and austerity, quite as far removed from the realities of Puritanism as it is from the sentimentalism of poetry.... No one will feel himself ennobled at once by having read one of my novels. But Hawthorne, when you have studied him, will be very precious to you.... Something of the sublimity of the transcendent, something of the mystery of the unfathomable, something of the brightness of the celestial, will have attached itself to you, and you will all but think that you too might live to be sublime.”

Anthony Trollope
“The Genius of *The Scarlet Letter*”
North American Review CCLXXIV
(September 1879) 203-222

“‘The idealist,’ wrote Emerson, ‘speaking of events, sees them as spirits.’ Such an idealist was Hawthorne, the voice of the deepened life of New England, and perhaps the greatest writer that we have yet given to the literature of the world.” [This history of American literature does not mention Melville.]

Henry S. Pancoast
An Introduction to American Literature
(Holt 1898,1902) 199

“*The Scarlet Letter* is not merely a masterpiece, it is a unique book...a masterpiece of beauty and power... Concentration upon concealment further contributes to the originality and the perfection of *The Scarlet Letter* by eliminating passion.... To this New England *Faust* there is no ‘second part.’ The sombre close, the scarcely alleviated gloom of the whole story are in fit keeping with the theme,--which is the truth that, in the words of the tale itself, ‘an evil deed invests itself with the character of doom’--and with its development through the torture of concealment to the expiation of confession. Here, for once, with Hawthorne we have allegory richly justifying itself, the allegory of literature not that of didacticism, of the imagination not of the fancy, allegory neither vitiated by caprice nor sterilized by moralizing, but firmly grounded in reality and nature....

[Hester’s] individuality is an inspiration deduced with the logic of nature and with such happy art that her symbolic quality is as incidental in appearance as it is seen to be inherent on reflection. Mr. James, who objects to the symbolism of *The Scarlet Letter*, possibly found her substantial enough to echo in the more charming but less vivid Pansy of his *Portrait of a Lady*.... *The Scarlet Letter* is, in fact, the Puritan Faust, and its symbolic and allegorical element, only obtrusive in a detail here and there at most, lifts it out

of the ordinary category of realistic romance... The beautiful and profound story is our chief prose masterpiece.”

W. C. Brownell
American Prose Masters
(Scribner's 1909) 96-103

“The tragedy of Dimmesdale lies in his defeat by evil through the temptation of cowardice and hypocrisy, which are sins. Chillingworth tragically, and sinfully, chooses evil when he decides to take a treacherous vengeance into his own hands, though vengeance, he knows, is another's. Hester alone emerges from her guilt through her public expiation and the long practice of virtue afterward.... She was the first important heroine in the American novel... The idea of such a label and its consequences for the wearer had long haunted Hawthorne, at least since he introduced it in 1837 into his story of 'Endicott and the Red Cross'.”

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(Macmillan 1921-68) 68-70

“It is a marvelous allegory. It is to me one of the greatest allegories in all literature, *The Scarlet Letter*. It's marvelous under-meaning! And it's perfect duplicity.... Hester Prynne was a devil. Even when she was so meekly going round as a sick-nurse. Poor Hester. Part of her wanted to be saved from her own devilishness. And another part wanted to go on and on in devilishness, for revenge. Revenge! Revenge! It is this that fills the unconscious spirit of woman to-day.”

D. H. Lawrence
Studies in Classic American Literature
(1923; Viking 1968) 99, 93

“*The Scarlet Letter* is the completest epitome of Hawthorne's genius.... The book is a moving series of symbols within a larger symbol from beginning to end.... Even as in the short tales he employs concrete objects to illustrate the most abstract end.... It is invidious to assert that these symbols are weakened because of their obviousness, for, after all, Hawthorne's idea of reality differed in great measures from that of today. ... *The Scarlet Letter* may be a series of pictures, but each picture is so fastidiously related to the one which follows that the mosaic falls into a rounded and reasonable design.”

Herbert Gorman
Hawthorne: A Study in Solitude
(Doran 1927) 83-90

“A review of Hawthorne's tales and sketches, the forms in which he did by far the greater part of his better work, will demonstrate that the method of *The Scarlet Letter* was the exception, that of *The House of the Seven Gables* the rule. The unity of the latter work depends neither upon plot consistency nor upon character revelation.... The modern mind tends to exclude allegory or to reduce it to a position of relative unimportance, and in so doing would lessen the value of that part of Hawthorne which he himself strove most ardently to develop and express.”

Robert E. Spiller
“The Mind and Art of Nathaniel Hawthorne”
Outlook CXLIX (1928) 650-52

“He is a great artist and an armed psychologist, an able story-teller and, one might say, the detective of the Puritan conscience.... We have no need to recall with what inflexibility, what morbid obstinacy Hawthorne discussed the problem of evil. Dostoyevsky was not more tragically, more persistently haunted by the idea of crime and punishment than he.... The wealth of psychological intuition in this novel is remarkable. It is the most human, the least moralizing...excepting of course the ending, edifying and conventional as could be desired...”

Once acquainted with Chillingworth, we become very indulgent of poor Hester's sin.... During the course of these searching examinations, Hawthorne shows himself again a very subtle psychologist and a precursor and pioneer of psychoanalysis. All the conditions in these scenes are so worked out that

Dimmesdale's resistance takes on a truly Freudian aspect.... However Freudian these diagnoses may appear in form, they are hardly so intentionally. The treatment to which Chillingworth submits his patient is conceived to be a torture and not a cure.... The true healer of Dimmesdale is not Chillingworth, it is Hester Prynne."

Regis Michaud
The American Novel Today
(Boston 1928) 32-45

"Now in examining Hawthorne, we are concerned with two historical centers: that of the first generation of Puritans in New England, in which occurs the action of *The Scarlet Letter*; and that of the post-Unitarian and Romantic intellectuals... Hawthorne, by nature an allegorist, and a man with a strong moral instinct...found in the early history of his own people and region the perfect material for a masterpiece. In the setting which he chose, allegory was realism, the idea was life itself; and his prose, always remarkable for its polish and flexibility, and stripped, for once, of all superfluity, was reduced to the living idea, it intensified pure exposition to a quality comparable in its way to that of great poetry. The compactness and complexity of the allegory will escape all save the most watchful readers.... Hawthorne turns his instrument of allegory, the gift of the Puritans, against the Puritans themselves, in order to indicate the limits of their intelligence... Hester represents the repentant sinner, Dimmesdale the half-repentant sinner, and Chillingworth the unrepentant sinner."

Yvor Winters
In Defense of Reason
(Alan Swallow 1937-47) 164-5,168

"Its symmetrical design is built around the three scenes on the scaffold of the pillory. There Hester endures her public shaming in the opening chapter. There, midway through the book, the minister, who has been driven almost crazy by his guilt but has lacked the resolution to confess it, ascends one midnight for self-torture, and is joined by Hester, on her way home from watching at a deathbed, and there they are overseen by Chillingworth.... His tongue endowed with eloquence in his great election sermon, the exhausted and death-stricken Dimmesdale totters to confess his sin at last... When the stiff layers of allegory have been peeled away, even Hawthorne's conception of Pearl is seen to be based on exact psychological notation. She suggests something of the terrifying precocity which Edwards' acute dialectic of the feelings revealed in the children who came under his observation during the emotional strain of the Great Awakening. She suggests, even more directly, James' *What Maisie Knew*."

F. O. Matthiessen
American Renaissance
(Oxford 1941) 242-82

"Form in *The Scarlet Letter* rises out of a basic division of the whole into four parts, each of which gains its distinctiveness from the character that precipitates or is responsible for the action that takes place within its limits. Furthermore, the order of the parts is determined by the desires and capabilities of the characters. Thus the community, aside from the four main characters, is responsible for the action in the first part (Chapter I-VIII); Chillingworth for that in the second (XI-XII); Hester for that in the third (XIII-XX); and Dimmesdale for that in the fourth (XXI-XXIV). Within each part, moreover, there is a noticeable division between cause and effect, between material dealing primarily with the activating agent and material dealing primarily with the person or persons acted upon."

John C. Gerber
"Form and Content in *The Scarlet Letter*"
The New England Quarterly 17 (1944) 25-55

"If the book remains a classic, it is of a minor order.... Explicitly, he condemned Hester Prynne as immoral; but implicitly, he glorified her as courageously idealistic... According to the orthodox, Hester Prynne sinned through blind passion, and her sin caused the tragedy. According to the romantic, Hester Prynne heroically 'gave all to love,' and tragedy resulted from the evil of society. According to the transcendentalists, Hester Prynne sinned through deception, but tragedy resulted from the conflict of her dream of freedom with the traditional creed of her lover. Dramatically, each of these interpretations is possible: *The Scarlet Letter* is rich in suggestion. But Hawthorne the moralist sought to destroy this

richness.... Perhaps he added the moralistic 'Conclusion' and the various criticisms of Hester, in order to placate his conscience.”

Frederick I. Carpenter
“Scarlet A Minus”
College English V (January 1944) 173-180

“It is too easy, from the moment that we mingle at the prison door with the women in hoods and the men in gray steeple-crowned hats until we stand beside Hester Prynne’s grave, to undervalue Hawthorne’s superb interfusion of fact and fancy in this tale of New England seventeenth-century-life.... Pearl is a living child not an animated monograph on the nature of Puritan children.... Perhaps the primary virtue of *The Scarlet Letter* is stylistic: its unity and perfection of tone.... Amid the other evidences of Hawthorne’s subtlety of art we should never forget this delicate balance between the present and the past....

The fact is that *The Scarlet Letter* is a nobler book than the other novels partly because we remember these four troubled characters as individuals long after we have forgotten the rise and fall of their moral temperatures. Thus Hester Prynne has the quality of the great characters in fiction who step from the pages of a book as living, breathing human beings. She is as real as Becky Sharp or the heroines of Shakespeare’s plays.... Hawthorne’s exposition of her spiritual development is admirable; from the timid, erring wife, shrinking before her husband, she becomes a dreamer of a new moral order, a free spirit almost disdainful of the feverish obsessions of Dimmesdale and Chillingworth....

Pearl is his little daughter, Una, adapted to the purposes of *The Scarlet Letter*. Her health, her elfin ways, her life and grace find parallels in the notebooks.... He is careful not to declare his credence in divine agencies; he never, for example, is more than vaguely suggestive about the transference [sic] of Hester’s badge of shame to the anguished breast of Dimmesdale. In fact, the temper of the book hints at the fatuousness of such fancies, even of the vision of the A in the heavens... He hints rather that these are objectifications or delusions held by tormented souls.”

Stanley T. Williams
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-1963) 425-6, 428-30

“This is still the high mark in American fiction... For *The Scarlet Letter*, like any masterpiece, is powerful everywhere and all the time. If its scene is bleak, itself is blended of the richest, most moving, most splendid things, put densely and inseparably together.”

Mark Van Doren
Nathaniel Hawthorne
(William Sloane 1949) 166

“Hawthorne places three characters who represent three of several possibilities for action in the evil world. It must be noted that none of the three characters represents the head or heart in complete isolation; rather, all illustrate the two in conflict.”

Donald A. Ringe
“Hawthorne’s Psychology of the Head and the Heart”
PMLA LXV (March 1950) 124-5

“The heart may err by lapsing into nature, which means, since it has not the innocence of nature, into corruption. The danger of the head lies in the opposite direction. It aspires to be superhuman, and is likely to dehumanize by violating the human limit.... In my opinion the judgment of Hawthorne upon his characters is entirely clear, although deliberately limited in its jurisdiction. But he permits the possibility of other interpretations to appear, so that the consistent clarity of his own emphasis is disguised.... Hester is wounded and led astray, not improved by her situation. Hawthorne permits his reader, if he wishes, to take his character from his control, to say that Hester Prynne is a great woman unhappily born before her time, or that she is a good woman wronged by her fellow men. But Hawthorne is less confident.”

Richard Harter Fogle
Hawthorne’s Fiction: The Light and the Dark

“Hester Prynne, the heroine of *The Scarlet Letter*, typifies romantic individualism, and in her story Hawthorne endeavored to exhibit the inadequacy of such a philosophy.... Many critics, however, who see her as a heroine *a la* George Sand, accept her philosophy and regard her as the central figure of the romance--the spokesman of Hawthorne's views favoring 'a larger liberty.' Hawthorne's women are usually more sympathetic and impressive than his men....

Hester's apologists...ignore or even decry the larger tendency of the book, which...exposes her moral inadequacy.... This opinion sublimely disregards Hawthorne's elaborate exposition of the progressive moral dereliction of Hester, during which 'all the light and graceful foliage of her character [was] withered up by this red-hot brand' of sinful passion. It even more remarkably ignores her paramour's seven-year-long travail of conscience for (in his own dying words) 'the sin so awfully revealed.' The most recent and immoderate advocate of Hester as the prepossessing exponent of a wider freedom in sexual relations is Professor Frederic I. Carpenter... It is a tribute to Hawthorne's art that Hester's champion believes in her so strongly that he presumes to rebuke her creator for abusing her and rejoices in his conviction that she triumphs over the author's 'denigrations'.... Although we are expected to love and pity Hester, we are not invited to condone her fault or to construe it as a virtue. More a victim of circumstances than a willful wrongdoer, she is nevertheless to be held morally responsible.”

Darrel Abel
“Hawthorne's Hester”
College English 13 (1952) 303-9

“Not only does the long introductory sketch of 'The Custom House' have no real connection with the story of *The Scarlet Letter* but it is hopelessly out of harmony with it.... Furthermore, as Elizabeth Chandler once pointed out, 'The main theme...is not the sin of illicit love, but the consequent sins of hypocrisy and revenge, and their effect on the soul.' For this reason, the whole discussion of whether or not Hester 'repented' of her sin is rather beside the point.” [!]

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel
(Holt 1952) 44-5

“At one end of the scale is [1] the orthodox Christian, or perhaps it should be called the orthodox Puritan reading, which finds the central motive of the book in the idea that sin is permanently warping.... A major variant of this orthodox reading [2] discovers the meaning of *The Scarlet Letter* in the concept of the Fortunate Fall, which acknowledges the reality of sin but considers it the source of wisdom and spiritual enlightenment.... The orthodox reading sees the tragedy in the action; whereas the Fortunate Fall reading finds it in the very essence of man's relation to the universe--his tragic plight. Less extreme versions...read the story in terms of redemption or purgation...

[3] Romantic readings rest on the premise that society is guilty of punishing individuals who have responded to a natural urge. No absolute sin has been committed by Hester and Dimmesdale; society has 'sinned' against nature. Man is good; institutions are bad because they thwart nature.[4] The transcendental reading is identified by the assertion that 'the sin of Hester and Arthur is of no importance in itself'; it is either the consequences of their adultery or what follows it that matters, namely the concealment of the sin, or, to put it more specifically, the failure of self-reliance in the lovers' not being true to themselves... The transcendental reading balances between the orthodox idea of absolute sin and the romantic denial of it... Finally, [5] there are relativist readings of *The Scarlet Letter* which concentrate upon the psychological implications of the sense of guilt. They are not interested in sin as a fact but as an element which may function to disturb the individual's psychic balance.... Hawthorne's position is orthodox.”

Charles Child Walcutt
“*The Scarlet Letter* and Its Modern Critics”
Nineteenth-Century Fiction VII (1953) 251-64

“It is a novel in twenty-four chapters, but, considered as a tragic drama, it is divided into the usual five acts and subdivided into eight scenes... There are of course some chapters that fall outside the dramatic framework, since each of them deals with a single character.... ACT I, SCENE 1 (Chapters I to III) is laid in the marketplace of Boston, fifteen or twenty years after the founding of the city.... SCENE 2 of the first act (Chapter IV) is a room in the prison that same June evening. Here, after the public tableau of the first scene, comes a private confrontation....

ACT II, SCENE 1 (Chapters VII and VIII) is laid in the governor’s hall, three years after the events of the first act. Little Pearl is thought to be such a strange and willful child that there has been talk among the Puritan magistrates of taking her away from her sinful mother.... This tableau and its brief epilogue are followed once more by a private confrontation. SCENE 2 of the second act (Chapter X) is set in Chillingworth’s laboratory... ACT III (Chapter XII) has only one scene, the scaffold of the pillory. Four years have passed since the second act. Subtly tortured by Chillingworth and finally driven half-insane, Dimmesdale has dressed in his ministerial robes and left his room at midnight, hoping to find relief in a private mimicry of public confession.... ACT IV is in two intimate scenes, the second of which is the longest in the drama. SCENE 2 (Chapters XIV and XV) is laid on the seashore, where Chillingworth is gathering herbs... SCENE 2 of the fourth act (including four chapters, XVI to XIX) is set in the forest, which forms another contrast with the marketplace and helps to reveal the moral background...

ACT V, in a single scene (Chapters XXI to XXIII) takes place three days after the meeting in the forest and is the culmination toward which the drama has been moving. Once again it is laid in the marketplace, with all the named characters present... In telling his story by a new method, Hawthorne had done more than to extend the unity and economy of the brief tale into the realm of the novel; and more than to discover a new architectural form that would be rediscovered by Henry James and copied by scores of respectably talented novelists after him. It is not too much to say that he had recaptured, for his New England, the essence of Greek tragedy.”

Malcolm Cowley
“Five Acts of *The Scarlet Letter*”
College English XIX (October 1957) 11-16

“As R. H. Fogle has said, there is generally speaking no special or exclusive symbolism in Hawthorne. His symbols are broadly traditional, coming to him from the Bible, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Spenser, and Bunyan--the light and the dark, the forest and the town, the dark woman and the fair woman, the fountain, the mirror, the cavern of the heart, the river, the sea, Eden, the rose, the serpent, fire and so on. Within the context of these symbols, the allegory proper may be, however, more peculiar to Hawthorne.... *The Scarlet Letter* includes several mythic archetypes. The novel incorporates its own comic-book or folklore version. Chillingworth is the diabolical intellectual, perhaps even the mad scientist. Dimmesdale is the shining hero or to more sophisticated minds the effete New Englander. Hester is the scarlet woman, a radical and nonconformist.... Allegory flourishes best, of course, when everyone agrees on what the truth is, when literature is regarded as exposition, not as discovery. A symbolistic literature responds to disagreements about the truth. It purports to discover or create truth, like Coleridge’s ‘Imagination.’ For the purely symbolistic writer ‘technique is discovery,’ to use Mark Shorer’s phrase.”

Richard Chase
The American Novel and Its Tradition
(Doubleday/Anchor 1957) 77, 79, 82

“At the end we are left with the symbol into which the whole meaning of the book has been distilled. Around the letter have gathered not only the explicit associations of Adulteress, Able, Affection, and Angel, but also the myriad subtle suggestions of art, atonement, ascension, and the Acts of the Apostles. Here is the A, each limb of which suggests an ascension, with Pearl the link between the two; here is the sable background of the Puritan community; and fused in the entire symbol are the flesh and the spirit, the word and the light, the letter A gules.”

Roy R. Male
Hawthorne’s Tragic Vision
(U Texas 1957) 102-117

“He doubtless inherited his Puritanism from the ‘steeple-crowned progenitors’ of the seventeenth century--from William Hathorn, who ordered the whipping of the Quaker woman, naked from the waist up, and John Hathorn, who, with Sam Sewall and William Stoughton, ordered the deaths of the Salem witches in 1692. Hawthorne was very critical of the bigotry, intolerance, and cruelty of the old Puritans, but his stories usually had a way of taking the Puritan side.... In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester is spokesman for the Romantic view, and her argument carries weight with many readers.... Does not Hester’s view carry individualism a bit too far? Does it not translate ‘the sacredness of the individual’ into ‘the individual a law unto himself?’ The book, taken as a whole, does not support the Romantic view.... Throughout the forest scene...Hester stands for Romantic individualism, and Arthur for the claims of law and conscience.... Hester, romantic heroine to the last, remained unconvinced, impenitent, unredeemed. She had at best an imperfect understanding of Arthur’s problem.”

Randall Stewart
American Literature and Christian Doctrine
(Louisiana State U 1958) 83-89

“The time scheme of the plot of *The Scarlet Letter* may be dated definitely. In Chapter XII, ‘The Minister’s Vigil,’ the event which brings the various characters together is the death of Governor Winthrop. From the records we know that the old magistrate died on March 26, 1649. However, Hawthorne gives the occasion as Saturday, ‘an obscure night of early May.’ Some suggestions may be made as reasons for changing the date. It would be difficult to have a night-long vigil in the cold, blustery month of March without serious plot complications.... The Election Day and the Election Sermons were well-known and traditionally established in the early colony in the months of May or June.... The characters named in *The Scarlet Letter*--other than Hester, Pearl, Chillingworth, and Dimmesdale, for whom we can find no historical bases--were actual figures in history. The fictional protagonists of the action move and gain their being in part through their realistic meetings with well-known people of colonial Boston.”

Charles Ryskamp
“The New England Sources of *The Scarlet Letter*”
American Literature 31 (1959) 257-72

“Hitherto unnoticed, we believe, is a rather striking item in the records of the Salem Quarterly Court which convened in November of 1668: ‘Hester Crawford, for fornication with John Wedg, as she confessed, was ordered to be severely whipped and that security be given to save the town from the charge of keeping the child. Mordecaie Craford [her father] bound. The judgment of her being whipped was respited for a month or six weeks after the birth of the child, and it was left to the Worshipful Major William Hathorn to see it executed on a lecture day’... In 1644, in the middle of the very period the novel covers, the unfortunate Mary Latham, who was married to an old man whom she did not love and who committed adultery with ‘divers young men,’ was actually subjected to the statutory death penalty by the Massachusetts Bay court. Hawthorne could not allow strict historical accuracy to kill off his heroine in the first chapter.”

Charles Boewe & Murray G. Murphey
“Hester Prynne in History”
American Literature 32 (1960): 202-4

“Pearl’s allegorical function brings into *The Scarlet Letter* the pagan values which Hawthorne had synthesized in ‘The Maypole of Merry Mount.’ The salvation of Pearl depends upon Dimmesdale. Until he acknowledges himself her father she can have no human patrimony, and must remain a Nature-spirit, untouched by the redemptive order that was broken in her conception. For Hawthorne, Nature is amoral but not malign. Witchcraft is not in the forest’s nature; it comes into being when man repudiates God and chooses Satan.”

Daniel G. Hoffman
Form and Fable in American Fiction
(Oxford 1961) 177-86

“The novel is not about adultery, for the act occurred before the opening of the story, nor about sin *per se*; but rather it is about the effect of sin on the mind and spirit of the characters. The scarlet letter comes to

stand not for adultery, but for the guilt which is the common experience of all men. No one is spared, and ultimately even those who seem most holy are implicated... If there is any obvious moralizing it is in Hawthorne's insistence that, although punishment can only be meted out by God, not man, man must still be true to himself and reveal a sign by which his guilt may be known."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

"Although it is disastrous in that it wrecks all possibilities for happiness in their lives, [passion] matures them morally and spiritually; under its influence they grow to a tragic height of character which they otherwise would probably not have reached."

Ernest Sandeen
"The Scarlet Letter as a Love Story"
PMLA LXXVII (September 1962) 425

"The Scarlet Letter has essentially the same meaning as nearly everything Hawthorne wrote...for in *The Scarlet Letter* that recurrent meaning is incarnated in a symbolism that represents the highest triumph of his art. Hawthorne's inner sphere of reality is really little more than the quiet and pure communion of a human mind and heart with others in love and charity. Using the symbol of a magnetic chain of humanity which, in some ways, corresponds to the Christian idea of a mystical union of the faithful--using this symbol of spiritual fellowship, Hawthorne is always concerned to show the multiple and subtle ways in which the chain can be broken, and the effects this violation has on the human spirit.... The conflict between Hester and the community is the most poised statement Hawthorne ever made of the tension between solitude and society, and at no point does he simplify the thoughts of a passionate woman."

David Levin
"Nathaniel Hawthorne: *The Scarlet Letter*"
(Basic Books 1965) 13, 18-21, 24

"The tragedy of *The Scarlet Letter* has chiefly sprung, not from Puritan society's imposition of false social ideals on the three main characters, but from their own inner world of frustrated desires. Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth have been ruled by feelings only half perceived, much less understood and regulated by consciousness; and these feelings, as Hawthorne's bold equation of love and hatred implies, successfully resist translation into terms of good and evil. Hawthorne does not leave us simply with the Sunday-school lesson that we should 'be true,' but with a tale of passion through which we glimpse the ruined wall--the terrible certainty that, as Freud put it, the ego is not master in its own house. It is this intuition that enables Hawthorne to reach a tragic vision worthy of the name: to see to the bottom of his created characters, to understand the inner necessity of everything they do, and thus to pity and forgive them in the very act of laying bare their weaknesses."

Frederick C. Crews
The Sins of the Fathers: Hawthorne's Psychological Themes
(Oxford 1966) 136-53

"In *The Scarlet Letter*, passion justifies nothing, while its denial redeems all. The fallen Eden of this world remains fallen; but the sinful priest purges himself by public confession, becomes worthy of his sole remaining way to salvation, death. Even Hester, though sin and suffering have made her an almost magical figure, a polluted but still terrible goddess, must finally accept loneliness and self-restraint instead of the love and freedom she dreamed. She cannot become the greater Ann Hutchinson she might have been had she remained unfallen, cannot redeem her sex from the indignities against which she once raged and plotted in secret. Passion has opened up for her no new possibilities, only closed off older ones."

Leslie Fiedler
Love and Death in the American Novel
(Dell 1966) 234

"Do we want Hester to hide her hair again and go back to her punishment and drab life in her isolated cottage? Or do we want her to stay the exotic beauty she is and flee, as she suggests, with her lover?... From now on (at least) the scarlet letter is surely ours to wear....

The action of *The Scarlet Letter* begins in 1642, the year that civil war began in England between King Charles I and the Puritan Parliament; the action ends in 1649, the year that the Puritans beheaded their king.... It would probably be going too far to see Hester as an allegorical embodiment of the forces antagonistic to Puritanism and to the forces represented by Chillingworth. Yet there is something like this represented by her desire to seek refuge 'in our native land, whether in some remote rural village or in vast London'."

H. Bruce Franklin, ed., Introduction
The Scarlet Letter and Other Writings by Nathaniel Hawthorne
(Lippincott 1967) 10, 16-17

"[Dimmesdale] asked for nothing but God's mercy, indicating the condition of the true penitent. As the plot is handled there can be only one solution. If Dimmesdale had confessed privately, to the Rev. John Wilson for example, he would need to confess publicly; he would be excommunicated, and he would stand trial for the crime of adultery. He could have been executed as Mary Latham and James Britton were in 1644. Although Hawthorne once considered having Dimmesdale confess to a Catholic priest, the difficulties of this ending are so obvious that we hardly need consider his rejection of it, though he was later able to use a somewhat similar confession in *The Marble Faun*."

Ernest W. Baughman
"Public Confession and *The Scarlet Letter*"
The New England Quarterly 40 (1967) 532-50

"Hawthorne [has] nearly as many reservations about Hester's sainthood as John Winthrop had about Mrs. Hutchinson's.... *The Scarlet Letter* is about the reasons why 'the woman' Hester Prynne reaches certain antinomian conclusions not unlike those of Ann Hutchinson; and why, though her progress seems somehow necessary, and though personally she enlists our deepest sympathies, both the tale and the teller force her to abandon those conclusions.... In *The Scarlet Letter* 'the woman's' discovery of an authentic, valid, and not shameful sexual nature is not unlike the Self's discovery of its own interior, 'spiritual' sanction. The *donnee* of Hawthorne's Romance is such that Hester discovers both together, and each reinforces the other."

Michael J. Colacurcio
"Footsteps of Ann Hutchinson: The Context of *The Scarlet Letter*"
ELH 39 (1972) 459-94

"*The Scarlet Letter* is not merely the story of Hester Prynne, 'The Custom-House' is an organic part of the work and a keystone in the artistic career of its author.... 'The Custom-House' has been explained in terms of its 'ethical dimensions'; it has been defined by its thematic parallels with the Romance which it prefaces; its tone has been compared to that of the Romance; its 'design' has been understood as Hawthorne's definition of his relationship to his art and to his country. But it has not been adequately understood in terms of its structure, in terms of the relationship of that structure to that of the Romance, or in terms of its significance for an understanding of Hawthorne's basic concerns in all four of his longer fictions....

In relating the structure of 'The Custom-House' to the story of Hester Prynne, it should be noted first that in the most general way the movement in the sketch--from a discussion of its setting (Salem) through what might be called its human dimension (the inmates and Surveyor Pue's story of Hester) to the final wisdom (Hawthorne's escape from the sterility of Salem into the creative life)--resembles that of the Romance itself, in which the progress of Hester in the eyes of the people of Boston is from (1) her initial humiliation as a sinner to (2) a condition in which she is tolerated, though scorned, through (3) a stage of respect for her good works, to (4) their love for her and for the letter which finally signifies Angel....

'The Custom-House' should be understood as a turning point in Hawthorne's artistic career, not only because it marks his virtual abandonment of the short story form but because it serves as a link between his earlier career and his major effort--the four Romances. The theme of the sketch--the conclusion toward which it inevitably drives--might be called a theme of the nature of freedom in general and of the independence of the artist in particular. This theme is reinforced by the biographical evidence, which suggests that when Hawthorne was dismissed from the surveyorship he experienced a great sense of

liberation, which was reflected in the speed--and pleasure--with which he wrote *The Scarlet Letter*. Dismissed in June of 1849, he endured a painful summer in which he attempted to redeem his reputation, if not his office, an ordeal which was exacerbated by the death of his mother in July.”

Robert L. Berner
“A Key to ‘The Custom-House’”
ATQ 41 (1979) 33-43

“Prior to the resurgence of critical interest in Hawthorne in the later 1940s and 1950s, most discussion of the author had centered on *The Scarlet Letter*, which was widely agreed to be a glorification of Hester and the impulse of Romantic individualism she supposedly represented... Nothing in the plot shows Hester attempting to evade responsibility for her actions. Of course, she cannot deny what has happened, but she makes no attempt to plead for diminished responsibility in the act. More importantly, she fully accepts the responsibility she has toward the human being who has been created as a result of it. In comparison to her, Dimmesdale’s refusal to recognize any obligation to Pearl is strikingly irresponsible. Whatever philosophy Hester represents, it is not one that entails an attempt to escape accountability for her actions.

Almost nothing that she does in *The Scarlet Letter* can be labeled as an example of Romantic individualism. During the entire length of the Romance her behavior is self-effacing [embroidering the letter in fancy gold?], unassertive, hard-working, disciplined.... Although *The Scarlet Letter* has a simple line of action, it achieves complexity, depth, and irony because its events are susceptible to integration within more than one plot structure. One of these plot structures is the story of star-crossed lovers, whose union, for one reason or another, is forbidden within their society and who, hence, are separated. Throughout, the possibility is implicit in *The Scarlet Letter* that Hester and Dimmesdale may escape the confining society and assert their love, but, as in the tradition of such fables as *Tristan and Isolde* and *Romeo and Juliet*, this possibility emerges as a likelihood only to be tragically aborted....

For Hester to return at all [in the end] means that she has abandoned her radical forest thoughts, when she brooded on the overthrow of society, and come to accept the human community, however imperfect, as the necessary habitat of the individual.”

Nina Baym
“Plot in Hawthorne’s Romances”
Ruined Eden of the Present
G. R. Thompson & Virgil L. Lokke, eds.
(Purdue U 1981) 49-70

“Hawthorne’s creed perhaps begins with this: He feels himself as delicate, fragile, and threatened, and identifies the menace of the world with the Puritanism of his ancestors.... [Updike is projecting himself] His insistence on delicate, ethereal heroines goes against not only our modern grain but his own as well-- for in *The Blithedale Romance* it seems clear that it is not the ectoplasmic Priscilla the narrator loves, as the last sentence proclaims in capitals, but the dark, sensual, and doomed Zenobia.... [Updike is wet-dreaming] We [?] do not feel that Dimmesdale and Hester...are guilty of anything.” [Updike published a *Scarlet Letter* trilogy of novels, identifying in one with Dimmesdale and in *Roger’s Version* with a leering Chillingworth, Hawthorne’s devil, who is Updike’s hero.]

John Updike
Hugging the Shore
(Random House 1984) 76-78

“By the 1840s the reverend rake had become so common a figure in popular fiction that Hawthorne could not overlook it in his search for a main male character for *The Scarlet Letter*. Almost every sensational novel of the decade contains at least one scene in which a seducer uses religion as an instrument of seduction.... *The Scarlet Letter* enjoyed a relatively good sale and made Hawthorne internationally famous largely because its central images sprang directly from popular culture.”

David S. Reynolds
Beneath the American Renaissance
(Harvard 1989) 262-3

“Some members of the Puritan community interpret it to mean ‘able’ or ‘angel’; a contemporary feminist might see in its fertile and ‘gorgeous luxuriance of fancy’ an emblem of the female sexual organ.” [Feminist critics are obsessed with genitals and often see nothing else.]

Shari Benstock

“*The Scarlet Letter* (a)doree, or the Female Body Embroidered”

Nathaniel Hawthorne: The Scarlet Letter

Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism (St. Martin’s 1991) 291

“Is he on her side or is he not?... [This reductive binary thinking is characteristic of Feminist critics.] The A articulates through its linear geometry the illustration of forbidden desire. Its divergent verticals suggest a schematic drawing of the vagina, viewed at once frontally and from below, and the horizontal bar of the letter signifies the intact hymeneal membrane, the sign that *no violation has occurred*.... [Hester is a virgin mother? Dimmesdale feels guilty for nothing?] The scarlet A therefore signifies at once the articulated oedipal anxieties and the covert incestuous desires expressed in the fetishistic silence.” [?]

Joanne Feit Diehl

“Re-Reading *The Letter*: Hawthorne, the Fetish, and the (Family) Romance”

same Case Studies 246-7, 251

“Yet while silencing Hester [?] with values he and his audience hold dear [Hester too is a Christian and knows she has sinned], he makes his [amoral atheist] readers uncomfortable with those values.”

David Leverenz

“Mrs. Hawthorne’s Headache: Reading *The Scarlet Letter*”

same Case Studies 273

Michael Hollister (2015)