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The Scarlet Letter: Condensed and Abridged with Symbolic Analysis

Nathaniel Hawthorne

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Set in 17th-century Puritan Boston during the years 1642 to 1649, The Scarlet Letter tells the story of Hester Prynne, who conceives through an adulterous affair and struggles to create a new life of repentance and dignity. The story begins during the summer of 1642, near Boston, Massachusetts, in a Puritan village. A young woman, Hester Prynne, has been led from the town prison with her infant daughter in her arms. On the breast of her gown is "a rag of scarlet The Scarlet Letter cloth" that "assumed the shape of a letter." It is the uppercase letter "A." The Scarlet Letter "A" represents the act of adultery that she has committed, and it is to be a symbol of her sin—a badge of shame—for all to see. The Scarlet Letter was published as a novel in the spring of 1850 by Ticknor & Fields, beginning Hawthorne's most lucrative period as a writer. When he delivered the final pages to Fields in February 1850, Hawthorne said that "some portions of the book are powerfully written" but doubted it would be popular. In fact, the book was an instant best-seller though, over fourteen years, it brought its author only $1,500. Its initial publication brought wide protest from natives of Salem, who did not approve of how Hawthorne had depicted them in his introduction "The Custom-House". A 2,500-copy second edition of The Scarlet Letter included a preface by Hawthorne dated March 30, 1850, that stated he had decided to reprint his introduction "without the change of a word... The only remarkable features of the sketch are its frank and genuine good-humor... As to enmity, or ill-feeling of any kind, personal or political, he utterly disclaims such motives". The Scarlet Letter was one of the first mass-produced books in America. Into the mid-nineteenth century, bookbinders of home-grown literature typically hand-made their books and sold them in small quantities. The first mechanized printing of The Scarlet Letter, 2,500 volumes, sold out within ten days, and was widely read and discussed to an extent not much experienced in the young country up until that time.

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