

The Scarlet letter
by *Nathaniel Hawthorne*

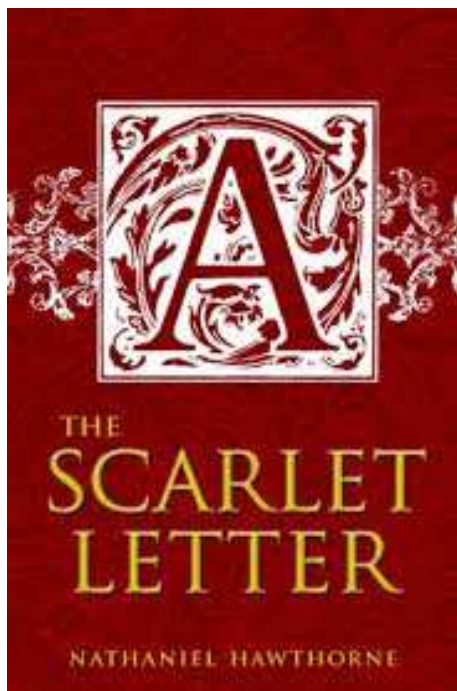
May the 13th at 6:30 pm

Hosted by Ruth Cory



The Scarlet Letter is an 1850 romantic work of fiction in a historical setting, written by Nathaniel Hawthorne, and is considered to be his magnum opus. Throughout the book, Hawthorne explores themes of legalism, sin, and guilt. In June 1642, in the Puritan town of Boston, a crowd gathers to witness the punishment of Hester Prynne, a young woman found guilty of adultery. She is required to wear a scarlet "A" ("A" standing for adulter) on her dress to shame her. She must stand on the scaffold for three hours, to be exposed to public humiliation. As Hester approaches the scaffold, many of the women in the crowd are angered by her beauty and quiet dignity. When demanded and cajoled to name the father of her child, Hester refuses. The experience of Hester and Dimmesdale recalls the story of Adam and Eve because, in both cases, sin results in expulsion and suffering. But it also results in knowledge – specifically, in knowledge of what it means to be immoral. For Hester, the Scarlet Letter is a physical manifestation of her sin and reminder of her painful solitude. Another theme is the extreme legalism of the Puritans and how Hester chooses not to conform to their rules and beliefs. Hester was rejected by the villagers even though she spent her life doing what she could to help the sick and the poor. Because they rejected her, she spent her life mostly in solitude, and wouldn't go to church.

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born on July 4, 1804, in Salem, Massachusetts; his birthplace is preserved and open to the public. William Hathorne, the author's great-great-great-grandfather, a Puritan, was the first of the family to emigrate from England, first settling in Dorchester, Massachusetts before moving to Salem. There he became an important member of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and held many political positions including magistrate and judge, becoming infamous for his harsh sentencing. William's son and the author's great-great-grandfather, John Hathorne, was one of the judges who oversaw the Salem witch trials. Having learned about this, the author probably added the "w" to his surname in his early twenties, shortly after graduating from college, in an effort to dissociate himself from his notorious forebears. Hawthorne was predominantly a short story writer in his early career. Upon publishing *Twice-Told Tales*, however, he noted, "I do not think much of them," and he expected little response from the public. His four major romances were written between 1850 and 1860: *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) and *The Marble Faun* (1860). Another novel-length romance, *Fanshawe* was published anonymously in 1828. Hawthorne defined a romance as being radically different from a novel by not being concerned with the possible or probable course of ordinary experience.



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