

Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for...

The Scarlet Letter

by Nathaniel Hawthorne

written by Pete Boysen

Copyright © 2008 by Prestwick House, Inc., P.O. Box 658, Clayton, DE 19938.
1-800-932-4593. www.prestwickhouse.com Permission to copy this unit for
classroom use is extended to purchaser for his or her personal use. *This material,
in whole or part, may not be copied for resale.*

ISBN 978-1-60389-637-5

Item No. 302964

Pre-Reading

1. Nathaniel Hawthorne spent some time living in the Brook Farm utopian community. These communities were popular during the first half of the eighteenth century, and such Transcendentalist thinkers as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman thought that such communities (in which people would blend together and work the land to support an idyllic society) would provide an alternative to mainstream society.

However, it did not turn out that way. Most of the communities folded relatively quickly. Hawthorne put down a \$1,000 deposit to move to Brook Farm and found himself assigned to maintain the “Gold Mine”—an ironically named pile of manure. He did not find his communal experience to be utopian at all, and so became one of the leaders, with Herman Melville, of the Anti-Transcendentalist school of thought.

Put yourself in Hawthorne’s place and write a diary entry that he might have written after his first week at Brook Farm.

2. There are many shades and synonyms for the color “red.” “Scarlet” is only one of these. It’s frequently used to refer either to disease, as in scarlet fever, or to the idea of humiliation—one often reads of characters blushing scarlet, for example. In *The Scarlet Letter*, of course, the emblem that Hester Prynne must wear is a sign of her public shaming.

Make a list of various shades of the color red. Then, make a list of synonyms for red, and of items that are commonly associated with the color red, such as a fire engine. Next to each item in your lists, write the first emotional association that you make with each shade or synonym.

Select several of your shades and synonyms that have an emotional association in common. Then, write a poem of at least ten lines that uses the words that you chose.

The Scarlet Letter

3. One of Nathaniel Hawthorne's college friends was Franklin Pierce, who was President of the United States from 1853-1857. Hawthorne helped his friend win the election by writing his campaign biography. In gratitude, President Pierce named Nathaniel Hawthorne consul to Liverpool.

Imagine if one of your close friends was elected President of the United States, and offered to make you an ambassador or consul to the place of your choice. Where would you like to go? What sorts of things do you think you would need to do to prepare for that sort of job? Why? Make a list that answers all these questions. For example, if you wanted to go to Alaska, you would need to bring not only warm clothing, but a variety of things to eat to supplement your diet. You might also bring some books to read during periods of inactivity.

4. The entire nature of communication and transportation was very different in the early 1800's than it is in our own time. Railroads were still a very new phenomenon, and so the fastest mode of transportation was often by horse. It took months to cross the Atlantic Ocean, and, for purposes of communication, nothing could travel faster than a letter. Telephones, fax machines, airplanes and e-mail were left to the fantasies of science fiction. Perhaps the most dramatic example of this lag time in communication was the Battle of New Orleans, the most decisive American victory in the War of 1812 with Great Britain. Ironically, this battle took place months after the war's treaty had been signed in Europe, but the news had not yet reached the armies.

Imagine that you were assigned a diplomatic job such as Hawthorne was. What challenges did Hawthorne face then that you would not face in our own time? In what ways would you face challenges that Hawthorne would not have faced? Make a Venn diagram to show similarities and differences as far as the challenges of the two time periods, and then write a paragraph summarizing your conclusions.

The Scarlet Letter

5. A blurb is the paragraph that describes the book that one is about to read. The blurb for *The Scarlet Letter* talks about the tragic downfall of Arthur Dimmesdale and the sadistic cruelty of Roger Chillingworth. Hester Prynne's trials as the woman in the middle of these two men also appear.

The purpose of a blurb is to grab the reader's interest, but not spoil the story by giving away too many of the plot's events. Imagine that someone wrote your biography, and write the blurb that would appear on the dust jacket. What novel or play would your life resemble?

Another common feature of a dust jacket is selections from positive reviews of the books. Write a positive, three-line review of the story of your life.

6. Society's need to shame its sinners in the public realm is the source of much of the conflict in *The Scarlet Letter*. In many instances, the ways in which the various characters respond to this need and the potential effects this has on their lives drives the plot. While such figures as the witch, John Wilson, and Roger Chillingworth symbolize this need, it is the need itself that is corrosive to humanity. In a way, the invisibility and inevitability of this abstract antagonist makes this story timeless.

In your own life, what invisible enemies do you face? What are the pressures that you face from day to day? Examples might be time constraints, peer pressure, body weight, procrastination, and family strife among others.

If you could face your invisible enemy, what would you say to it? Write a conversation that the two of you might have.

The Custom-House

7. Nathaniel Hawthorne had taken a job at a custom-house in Salem, Massachusetts, because his writing did not provide enough income for him yet. In 1848, when the politician who had given him this job was defeated in the elections, and new politicians were brought in, the new regime took Hawthorne's job away and gave it to one of their own cronies.

Such use of government jobs to reward supporters and punish rivals continues to this day. Hawthorne wrote "The Custom-House," in part, to protest the way in which his job was taken from him for no other reason than a change in political fortunes.

Imagine that you were working in a government position and were doing an excellent job. However, after an election cycle, things went against your candidate, and you found yourself out of a job. Write a letter to your new boss – in other words, the person responsible for your need to find new employment.

Chapter 1: The Prison-Door

8. According to Chapter 1, all new colonies find that they have almost immediate need to set aside land for two purposes: a cemetery and a prison. The implication is that all societies have two inevitabilities: death and crime.

In the colonial era, death was certainly a daily possibility. If you have done any research into that time period, you know that such factors as starvation, the cold, disease, Indian attacks, and farming accidents were common. The death rates for every new colony were high – and in the instance of the colony of Roanoke, the entire settlement disappeared. The inevitability of crime, of course, was not as accepted, as the early Transcendentalist experiments showed an optimism as to the ways that people would respond with a minimum of rules placed on their lives.

Write a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne. Do you agree that a community's first two building priorities should be facilities for the dead and for criminals? Use examples from personal experience and contemporary events to support your answer.

9. At the end of Chapter 1, the reader is presented with a rose. The narrator suggests two possible interpretations for this rose: a symbol for a “sweet moral blossom” that may appear during the story, or as relief for “the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow.” In other words, this rose might symbolize a nugget of morality that one might learn from reading *The Scarlet Letter*; however, it could also be the only peace with which the reader can emerge at the story's end.

Select one of these possibilities for the significance of the rose. Write a poem of at least ten lines that uses the rose as a symbol to express the significance that you have chosen. You should also use at least three other figurative devices to express the same meaning as the rose. The rhyme scheme and meter are up to you.