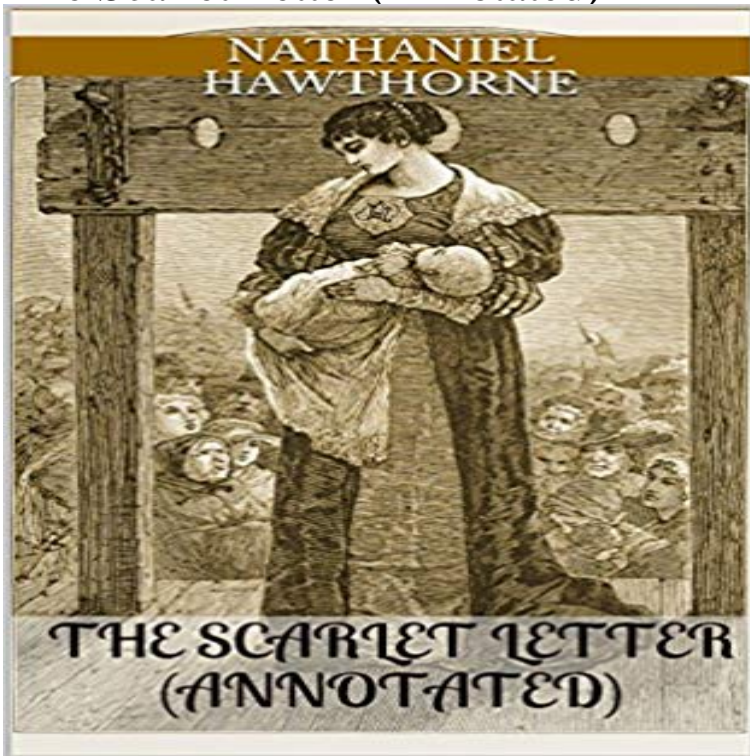


The Scarlet Letter (Annotated)



Nathaniel Hawthorne was born in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1804. His family descended from the earliest settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony; among his forebears was John Hathorne (Hawthorne added the w to his name when he began to write), one of the judges at the 1692 Salem witch trials. Throughout his life, Hawthorne was both fascinated and disturbed by his kinship with John Hathorne. Raised by a widowed mother, Hawthorne attended Bowdoin College in Maine, where he met two people who were to have great impact upon his life: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who would later become a famous poet, and Franklin Pierce, who would later become president of the United States. After college Hawthorne tried his hand at writing, producing historical sketches and an anonymous novel, *Fanshawe*, that detailed his college days rather embarrassingly. Hawthorne also held positions as an editor and as a customs surveyor during this period. His growing relationship with the intellectual circle that included Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller led him to abandon his customs post for the utopian experiment at Brook Farm, a commune designed to promote economic self-sufficiency and transcendentalist principles. Transcendentalism was a religious and philosophical movement of the early nineteenth century that was dedicated to the belief that divinity manifests itself everywhere, particularly in the natural world. It also advocated a personalized, direct relationship with the divine in place of formalized, structured religion. This second transcendental idea is privileged in *The Scarlet Letter*. After marrying fellow transcendentalist Sophia Peabody in 1842, Hawthorne left Brook Farm and moved into the Old Manse, a home in Concord where Emerson had once lived. In 1846 he published *Mosses from an Old Manse*, a collection of essays and

stories, many of which are about early America. Mosses from an Old Manse earned Hawthorne the attention of the literary establishment because America was trying to establish a cultural independence to complement its political independence, and Hawthornes collection of stories displayed both a stylistic freshness and an interest in American subject matter. Herman Melville, among others, hailed Hawthorne as the American Shakespeare. In 1845 Hawthorne again went to work as a customs surveyor, this time, like the narrator of *The Scarlet Letter*, at a post in Salem. In 1850, after having lost the job, he published *The Scarlet Letter* to enthusiastic, if not widespread, acclaim. His other major novels include *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), and *The Marble Faun* (1860). In 1853 Hawthornes college friend Franklin Pierce, for whom he had written a campaign biography and who had since become president, appointed Hawthorne a United States consul. The writer spent the next six years in Europe. He died in 1864, a few years after returning to America. The majority of Hawthornes work takes Americas Puritan past as its subject, but *The Scarlet Letter* uses the material to greatest effect. The Puritans were a group of religious reformers who arrived in Massachusetts in the 1630s under the leadership of John Winthrop (whose death is recounted in the novel). The religious sect was known for its intolerance of dissenting ideas and lifestyles. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne uses the repressive, authoritarian Puritan society as an analogue for humankind in general. The Puritan setting also enables him to portray the human soul under extreme pressures. Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth, while unquestionably part of the Puritan society in which they live, also reflect universal experiences. Hawthorne speaks specifically to American issues, but he circumvents the aesthetic and thematic limitations that might accompany such a focus. His universality and his dramatic flair have ensured his place in the literary

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