

American Masterpiece

from *The Scarlet Letter*

Novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne



Nathaniel Hawthorne

COMMON CORE

RL 6 Analyze a case in which grasping a point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant. **W 4** Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriated to task, purpose, and audience.

BACKGROUND Published in 1850, *The Scarlet Letter* is a short historical novel set in Salem in the earliest days of the Massachusetts Bay colony. Vividly re-creating the world of Puritan New England, Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel explores universal themes of sin, retribution, and forgiveness. It traces the story of Hester Prynne, who commits the sin of adultery and is publicly punished for it, and the two men in her life—her one-time lover and her vengeful husband—who keep their own sins hidden from public view. Part of Hester's punishment is to wear, for all her life, a scarlet letter A sewn onto the bodice of her gown. "The publication of *The Scarlet Letter* was in the United States a literary event of the first importance," wrote author and critic Henry James. The carefully crafted novel, with its serious themes and complex symbolism, showed that writers in the young nation could produce literature equal to that of Britain and could draw on America's history and heritage in producing it.

TEXT ANALYSIS In the following scene from the novel's opening, Hester Prynne is about to appear in public for the first time with the scarlet letter on her gown. Waiting for her appearance outside the jail door, members of the community talk about her and her crime. As the focus shifts from one speaker to another, readers get slightly different perspectives on Hester. All of the women condemn her, but they each have their own point of view. Some are harsher than others, and some hint at Hester's strong and defiant personality, which will emerge as a major force in the novel. Read the passage carefully, and note how the shifts in point of view slowly reveal a subtle range of attitudes in the community.

WRITE We have all stood in a group of people and discussed (or heard discussed) another person's behavior or situation. In some cases, the tone might have been respectful and generous; in others, it may have been gossipy and judgmental. Imagine that you have just witnessed such a discussion about someone who is accused of committing a crime. Imagine what that crime was, what the speakers might say, and how their views and perspectives might be subtly or completely different. Then write the scene out, using the excerpt on the right as a model for formatting and punctuation.



“Goodwives,” said a hard-featured dame of fifty, “I’ll tell ye a piece of my mind. It would be greatly for the public behoof, if we women, being of mature age and church-members in good repute, should have the handling of such malefactresses as this Hester Prynne. What think ye, gossips? If the hussy stood up for judgment before us five, that are now here in a knot together, would she come off with such a sentence as the worshipful magistrates have awarded? Marry, I trow not!”

“People say,” said another, “that the Reverend Master Dimmesdale, her godly pastor, takes it very grievously to heart that such a scandal should have come upon
10 his congregation.”

“The magistrates are God-fearing gentlemen, but merciful overmuch, — that is a truth,” added a third autumnal matron. “At the very least, they should have put the brand of a hot iron on Hester Prynne’s forehead. Madam Hester would have winced at that, I warrant me. But she, — the naughty baggage, — little will she care what they put upon the bodice of her gown! Why, look you, she may cover it with a brooch, or such like heathenish adornment, and so walk the streets as brave as ever!”

“Ah, but,” interposed, more softly, a young wife, holding a child by the hand, “let her cover the mark as she will, the pang of it will be always in her heart.”

“What do we talk of marks and brands, whether on the bodice of her gown,
20 or the flesh of her forehead?” cried another female, the ugliest as well as the most pitiless of these self-constituted judges. “This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die. Is there not law for it? Truly there is, both in the Scripture and the statute-book. Then let the magistrates, who have made it of no effect, thank themselves if their own wives and daughters go astray!”

“Mercy on us, goodwife,” exclaimed a man in the crowd, “is there no virtue in woman, save what springs from a wholesome fear of the gallows? That is the hardest word yet! Hush, now, gossips; for the lock is turning in the prison-door, and here comes Mistress Prynne herself.”

