

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*

The Custom-House: A Summary

Just when you thought, “Can Mrs. Spain be any nicer?” Here is a BIG GIFT for you. Instead of having you read the frame of TSL, which indicates who the narrator is, where the story comes from, etc., I have given you a quick summary to prevent you from having to read almost 40 pages!!! You will be TESTED on this information!

The Custom House provides a **frame** for *The Scarlet Letter*. The nameless narrator, who shares quite a few traits with the Nathaniel Hawthorne, takes a job as the surveyor (reviewer) of the Salem Custom House. (“Customs” are the taxes paid on foreign imports into a country; a “customhouse” is the building where these taxes are paid.) He finds the establishment to be a run-down place, situated on a rotting wharf in a half-finished building.

The narrator spends his days at the customhouse trying to amuse himself because he usually does not have much to do. One rainy day he discovers some documents in the building's unoccupied second story. Looking through the pile, he notices a manuscript that is bundled with a scarlet, gold-embroidered piece of cloth in the shape of the letter “A.” The narrator examines the scarlet badge and holds it briefly to his chest, but he drops it because it seems to burn him. He then reads the manuscript. **It is the work of one Jonathan Pue, who was a customs surveyor a hundred years earlier. An interest in local history led Pue to write an account of events taking place in the middle of the seventeenth century—a century before Pue's time and two hundred years before the narrator's.** The narrator decides to write the story of what happened to Hester Prynne, even though his Puritan ancestors would probably not have approved.

The narrator is not just a stand-in for Hawthorne; he is carefully constructed to enhance the book aesthetically and philosophically. The narrator finds writing therapeutic. Contrary to his Puritan ancestors' assertions, he also discovers it to be practical: his introduction provides a cogent discourse on American history and culture. Hawthorne wrote at a time when America sought to distinguish itself from centuries of European tradition by producing uniquely “American” writers—those who, like Hawthorne, would encourage patriotism by enlarging the world's sense of America's comparatively brief history.

Yet Hawthorne, like the narrator, had to balance the need to establish a weighty past with the equally compelling need to write an interesting and relevant story. Neither the narrator nor Hawthorne wants to see his work pigeonholed as “only” American. Americanness remains both a promise and a threat, just as the eagle over the customhouse door both offers shelter and appears ready to attack. The tale of the scarlet letter may add to the legitimacy of American history and culture, but in order to do so it must transcend its Americanness and establish a universal appeal: only then can American culture hold its own in the world.

Hester's story comes to us twice removed. It is filtered first through John Pue and then through the narrator. Awareness of the story's various stages of treatment gives the reader a greater sense of its remoteness from contemporary life, of its antique qualities—it is a history with a history. Yet the story's survival over the years speaks to the profundity of its themes: the narrator has found, in American history and in Hester's life, a tale rich in philosophical meaning.

The Custom House Questions

Once you have read the document that explains *The Custom House*, you will then need to answer the following questions in COMPLETE SENTENCES!

1. What is the **frame** in a story?
2. What is the narrator's name in The Scarlet Letter?
3. Explain the job description for a surveyor in a Custom House.
4. What does the narrator find one rainy day? (BE SPECIFIC!)
5. What is the name of the surveyor who writes the original account of what happened to Hester Prynne?
6. How old is the story to OUR narrator when he finds it?
7. Describe the writing scene in America and how Hawthorne created an American novel.
8. In what year was The Scarlet Letter published?