

CliffsNotes.com® About the Author for **THE SCARLET LETTER**

Nathaniel Hawthorne

Growing up

Born July 4, 1804, Nathaniel Hawthorne was the only son of Captain Nathaniel Hawthorne and Elizabeth Clarke Manning Hawthorne. (Hawthorne added the “w” to his name after he graduated from college.) Following the death of Captain Hawthorne in 1808, Nathaniel, his mother, and his two sisters were forced to move in with Mrs. Hawthorne’s relatives, the Mannings. Here Nathaniel Hawthorne grew up in the company of women without a strong male role model; this environment may account for what biographers call his shyness and introverted personality.

This period of Hawthorne’s life was mixed with the joys of reading and the resentment of financial dependence. While he studied at an early age with Joseph E. Worcester, a well-known lexicographer, he was not particularly fond of school. An injury allowed him to stay home for a year when he was nine, and his early “friends” were books by Shakespeare, Spenser, Bunyan, and 18th century novelists.

During this time Mrs. Hawthorne moved her family to land owned by the Mannings near Raymond, Maine. Nathaniel’s fondest memories of these days were when “I ran quite wild, and would, I doubt not, have willingly run wild till this time, fishing all day long, or shooting with an old fowling piece.” This idyllic life in the wilderness exerted its charm on the boy’s imagination but ended in 1819 when he returned to Salem to prepare for two years for college entrance.

Education

In 1821, Hawthorne entered Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine. Among his classmates were Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who would become a distinguished poet and Harvard professor, and Franklin Pierce, future 14th president of the United States. Another classmate, Horatio Bridge, was later to offer a Boston publisher a guarantee against loss if he would publish Hawthorne’s first collection of short stories.

Hawthorne graduated middle of his class in 1825. Regarding his aspirations, he wrote, “I do not want to be a doctor and live by men’s diseases, nor a minister to live by their sins, nor a lawyer to live by their quarrels. So, I don’t see that there is anything left for me but to be an author.”

Early Career

For the next 12 years, Hawthorne lived in comparative isolation in an upstairs chamber at his mother’s house, where he worked at perfecting his writing craft. He also began keeping notebooks or journals, a habit he continued throughout his life. He often jotted down ideas and descriptions, and his words are now a rich source of information about his themes, ideas, style experiments, and subjects.

CliffsNotes.com® About the Author for **THE SCARLET LETTER**

In 1828, he published his first novel, *Fanshaw: A Tale*, at his own expense. *Fanshaw* was a short, imitation Gothic novel and poorly written. Dissatisfied with this novel, Hawthorne attempted to buy up all the copies so that no one could read it. He did not publish another novel for almost 25 years. By 1838, he had written two-thirds of the short stories he was to write in his lifetime. None of these stories gained him much attention, and he could not interest a publisher in printing a collection of his tales until 1837, when his college friend Horatio Bridge backed the publishing of *Twice-Told Tales*, a collection of Hawthorne's stories that had been published separately in magazines. His schoolmate and friend, Longfellow, reviewed the book with glowing terms. Edgar Allan Poe, known for his excoriating reviews of writers, not only wrote warmly of Hawthorne's book but also took the opportunity to define the short story in his now famous review. *Twice-Told Tales* is considered a masterpiece of literature, and it contains unmistakably American stories.

Financial Burdens and Marriage

In 1838, Hawthorne met Sophia Amelia Peabody, and the following year they were engaged. It was at this time that Hawthorne invested a thousand dollars of his meager capital in the Brook Farm Community at West Roxbury. There he became acquainted with Ralph Waldo Emerson and the naturalist Henry David Thoreau. These transcendentalist thinkers influenced much of Hawthorne's thinking about the importance of intuition rather than intellect in uncovering the truths of nature and human beings. Hawthorne left this experiment in November 1841, disillusioned with the viewpoint of the community, exhausted from the work, and without financial hope that he could support a wife. From this experience, however, he gained the setting for a later novel, *The Blithedale Romance*.

In a trip to Boston after leaving Brook Farm, Hawthorne reached an understanding about a salary for future contributions to the *Democratic Review*. He and Sophia married in Boston on July 9, 1842, and left for Concord, Massachusetts, where they took up residence in the now-famous "Old Manse."

"Old Manse"

Hawthorne's life at the "Old Manse" was happy and productive, and these were some of the happiest years of his life. He was newly married, in love with his wife, and surrounded by many of the leading literary figures of the day: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and Bronson Alcott. During this time, Hawthorne wrote for the *Democratic Review* and produced some tales that would be published in 1846 in *Mosses from an Old Manse*.

Financial problems continued to plague the family, however. The birth of their first child, Una, caused Hawthorne to once again seek a financially secure job. With the help of his old friends, Hawthorne was appointed a surveyor for the port of Salem. His son, Julian, was born in 1846.

CliffsNotes.com® About the Author for **THE SCARLET LETTER**

Although the new job eased the financial problems for the family, Hawthorne again found little time to pursue his writing. Nevertheless, during this time, he was already forming ideas for a novel based on his Puritan ancestry and introduced by a preface about the Custom House where he worked. When the Whigs won the 1848 election, Hawthorne lost his position. It was a financial shock to the family, but it fortuitously provided him with time to write *The Scarlet Letter*.

The Golden Years of Writing

During these years Hawthorne was to write some of the greatest prose of his life. In 1849, Hawthorne wrote *The Scarlet Letter*, which won him much fame and greatly increased his reputation. While warmly received here and abroad, *The Scarlet Letter* sold only 8,000 copies in Hawthorne's lifetime.

In 1849, when the family moved to Lennox, Massachusetts, Hawthorne made the acquaintance of Herman Melville, a young writer who became a good friend. Hawthorne encouraged the young Melville, who later thanked him by dedicating his book, *Moby Dick*, to him. During this — the "Little Red House" period in Lennox — Hawthorne wrote *The House of the Seven Gables* and some minor works that were published in 1851.

Around the time that Nathaniel and Sophia's second daughter, Rose, was born, the family moved to West Newton, where Hawthorne finished and published his novel about the Brook Farm experience, *The Blithedale Romance*, and also *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys*. Because there was little to no literature published for children, Hawthorne's book was unique in this area.

Later Writing and Death

In Concord, the Hawthornes found a permanent house, along with nine acres of land, which they purchased from Bronson Alcott, the transcendentalist writer and father of Louisa May Alcott. Hawthorne renamed the house The Wayside, and in May, 1852, he and his family moved in. Here, Hawthorne was to write only two of his works: *Tanglewood Tales*, another collection designed for young readers, and *A Life of Pierce*, a campaign biography for his old friend from college. As a result of the biography, President Pierce awarded Hawthorne with an appointment as United States consul in Liverpool, England. The Hawthornes spent the next seven years in Europe.

Although Hawthorne wrote no additional fiction while serving as consul, he kept a journal that later served as a source of material for *Our Old Home*, a collection of sketches dealing with English scenery, life, and manners published in 1863. While in Italy, Hawthorne kept a notebook that provided material for his final, complete work of fiction, which was published in England as *Transformation* and, in America, as *The Marble Faun*.

CliffsNotes.com® About the Author for **THE SCARLET LETTER**

By the autumn of 1863, Hawthorne was a sick man. In May, 1864, he traveled to New Hampshire with his old classmate Pierce in search of improved health. During this trip, he died in his sleep on May 19, 1864, in Plymouth, New Hampshire. He was buried in the Sleepy Hollow Cemetery at Concord. Widely eulogized as one of America's foremost writers, his fellow authors gathered to show their respect. Among his pallbearers were Longfellow, Holmes, Lowell, and Emerson. Today he rests there with Washington Irving, Emerson, Thoreau, and the Alcotts, as well as his wife, Sophia.