*The Scarlet Letter* Preface: The Custom House Notes

Hawthorne published *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850

* At the time, The Custom House was what sold the book
  + People wanted the satire about local politics
* Sold out in 10 days
  + 6000 copies in six months
  + Nothing compared to a popular romance novel
  + Publisher kept promoting him after his death, that’s what made his reputation
* Custom House introduces the idea of interpretation
  + Situates the narrative
  + Author as historian
    - Narrator lives in mid-19th century, but writes about 1700s (or does he?)
* Parallels many themes seen in *The Scarlet Letter*
  + Unjust alienation, searching for a few who will understand
    - Narrator b/c of politics, Hester b/c of Pearl
  + Art (writing, needlework, are they noble?)
    - Hester’s needlework is useful, that may be Hawthorne saying his writing is also useful although it may not seem to be so
    - Authorship
      * Precarious profession
      * Not much money
      * Money in newspaper and political writing
      * *Scarlet Letter* sold 7800 copies in Hawthorne’s lifetime for about $1500
      * Male authorship was especially suspect, women were much more accepted as writers – men authors were often very defensive
  + Comes home – faces history, relatives, etc.
    - Home can serve as a place of penance,
    - At home, a person can make amends for the past (Hawthorne’s relatives)
* Connects to Hawthorne
  + Working in Custom House
* Adds drama – “this letter that burns…”
* How different are we from the Puritans?

*Scarlet Letter* Introduction: Custom House

The Custom House is a long introductory essay set in the mid-nineteenth century, when Hawthorne wrote the novel. The essay describes the narrator’s feelings about losing a well-paying political job. It also sets the scene for the novel to follow by explaining the supposed discovery of the scarlet “A” and a manuscript of its history.

Summary

The narrator begins this long sketch by explaining that he lost his job in the Salem Custom House when the political power shifted to the Whigs with the election of General Taylor to the presidency. Unlike the generous Democrats, he says, the Whigs were very cruel and took delight in removing him from his position. He rationalizes losing his job by: first, claiming he needs the time off after nearly three years on the job; second, believing that being fired by the Whigs solidifies his position with the opposition party; last, saying that it is heroic to be fired, since his intellect is not being challenged there—his “fancy and sensibility” (in regards to his writing abilities) are purposeless and becoming dull.

He next discusses his stern Puritan ancestors and how they would have found his present career as a writer unsuitable. He also criticizes the men with whom he works at the Custom House as being old, lazy, foolish, inactive and unproductive veterans. The friends in Hawthorne’s literary circle, Emerson, Thoreau, and Longfellow, are intellectuals who discuss ideas and higher universal ideals, unlike the men of the Custom House who have narrow interests.

To give the story an air of historical reality, the narrator claims that one rainy day when he was poking around in a dusty corner in the attic of the Custom House, he found a scarlet “A” and pages of a manuscript explaining its existence and telling the story of Hester Prynne. He describes the exact measurements of the scarlet letter. He also tells how when he places the scarlet letter on his chest he experiences a burning sensation. This introduces the reader to the A’s symbolic and supernatural qualities, preparing us for the tale to follow. However, despite the skill with which Hawthorne describes the symbolic A, this is **not** a true story and there was no such letter or manuscript.