

Foreword to the Penguin Classic Edition of *The Scarlet Letter*

Like millions of American teenagers, I first encountered *The Scarlet Letter* as an assigned text in a high school English class. And like millions of American teenagers before and after me, I found the book strange and difficult, bordering on oppressive. It just seemed so *foreign*—so cold and forbidding and buttoned-up—and so *remote*, as if it had been written not just in another century, but on another planet, a nightmare world where someone’s whole life could be ruined just because she committed the “sin” of fornication, or whatever they called it back in those creepy, long-gone, witch-burning Puritan days. What did that have to do with America in the freewheeling late 1970s, post-*Roe v. Wade* and pre-AIDS, with the Sexual Revolution in full swing?

I didn’t give Hawthorne’s novel much thought in the years that followed. It just got filed away in that mental drawer reserved for “mandatory classics,” those books you had to read because the guardians of the culture had decided they were good for you, bitter spoonfuls of literary medicine that everybody had to choke down, whether you liked it or not. The only good thing about reading a mandatory classic like *The Scarlet Letter* was the knowledge that I’d done my civic duty, and would never have to read it again.

But then a funny thing happened. Not long ago, a producer from the radio show *Studio 360* asked if I’d like to participate in a piece they were doing on *The Scarlet Letter*. She thought I might have an interesting perspective because my novels *Little Children* and *The Abstinence Teacher* explored some of the same themes Hawthorne had addressed—the conflict between religion and desire, the ostracism of sex offenders, and the unruly emotions seething beneath the orderly surface of small-town life. I warned her that I disliked the book and would be speaking as a hostile critic rather than as a booster. She said that would be fine; differing opinions were welcome. So I picked up the novel—my old nemesis—hoping to gather ammunition for my long-

delayed takedown of this frigid classic, and discovered that I was an idiot. *The Scarlet Letter* wasn't the novel I thought it was—it was something far stranger and more beautiful than anything I'd read in a long time. By the time I showed up for the interview, I was a convert, an unabashed fan and advocate for a book that I had totally misunderstood and woefully underestimated. I wanted to go find Hawthorne and apologize.

Of course it wasn't *The Scarlet Letter* that had changed since the late 1970s, it was me, and it was the world around me, or at least my sense of that world. For one thing, I had read a lot more, enough to recognize in Hawthorne's story the source of a powerful gothic strain in American fiction—a rich tradition that combines elements of the supernatural with closely observed social realism—that has informed the works of writers like Flannery O'Connor, Joyce Carol Oates, Toni Morrison, and Stephen King, among others. I had also lived through decades of conservative religious backlash against the perceived excesses of the Sexual Revolution, and could see that the battle Hawthorne was depicting between individual freedom and theological control—a battle I had naively consigned to the distant past—was still being waged in twenty-first-century America. In some parts of the world, it's even worse than that: women are still being stoned to death for committing adultery, or murdered for the “crime” of being raped, or otherwise “dishonoring” their families. By the standards of our world, you might even say that Hester Prynne got off easy, only having to wear that embroidered letter “A” on her dress all those years, advertising her shame to everyone who knew her.

One of the things I hadn't fully appreciated the first time around is that *The Scarlet Letter* is a historical novel, its setting as distant from Nathaniel Hawthorne's time as Hawthorne's is from ours today. Writing his novel in the mid-nineteenth century, Hawthorne was squinting two hundred years into the past, trying to understand his Puritan ancestors and the dark legacy they'd passed down to the generations that had followed. Placing Hawthorne in his proper historical moment helps us to see *The Scarlet Letter* as part of another great literary tradition—the nineteenth-century novel of adultery—and to set Hester Prynne beside characters like Emma Bovary and Anna

Karenina. The comparison is illuminating.

The European adultery novels feel sophisticated and contemporary and immediately relevant. They feature recognizably “modern” women rebelling against the dull misery of unhappy marriages, seeking their salvation in romance and illicit sex. Tolstoy and Flaubert address the topic of infidelity head-on; we see Emma and Anna make the choices that doom them, then watch in horror as they get betrayed by their lovers. Both women are martyrs to passion; once they cross the fateful line, there’s no way forward, and no turning back.

Compared with *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina*, *The Scarlet Letter* is disappointingly chaste and old-fashioned. Hawthorne refuses to provide even a fleeting glance of the original sin, the love affair that turned Hester into a disgraced single mother and Reverend Dimmesdale into a pious fraud. Even their happy reunion scene, late in the novel, sparks little in the way of physical fireworks. There’s only breathless conversation—erotic in its own way—and a single act of abandon, when Hester “undid the clasp that fastened the scarlet letter, and, taking it from her bosom, threw it to a distance among the withered leaves.”

But Hawthorne offers us something that neither Tolstoy nor Flaubert can provide—a glimmer of hope, and a paragon of courage. Instead of a sexual martyr, we get a hero, a strong woman at peace with her own conscience, willing to accept the punishment for her rebellion, but refusing to admit that it was a sin. “What we did,” she informs Dimmesdale, “had a consecration of its own.” She tells her cowardly lover that he needs to answer only to himself, and to find a way to live honestly, even if it means losing his social position and striking out for the wilderness. “There is happiness to be enjoyed!” she declares. “There is good to be done. Exchange this false life of thine for a true one.”

Dimmesdale can’t do it, of course. In an astonishing climactic scene, he stands before the community and confesses his guilt, exposing himself as a hypocrite, poisoned from the inside out, literally consumed by his shame. In the European novels, it’s the woman who dies, but in *The Scarlet Letter*, not only does Hester survive, she thrives, growing

stronger with the decades, raising her child, and eventually becoming a sort of celebrity, a wise woman and emotional healer. Even the scarlet letter takes on a new meaning: it “ceased to be a stigma that attracted the world’s scorn and bitterness, and became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence, too.”

Exchange this false life for a true one.

That’s the line that really resonates today, the command that brings the novel into focus for a contemporary audience. At its heart, *The Scarlet Letter* is a coming-out story. I couldn’t see that back when I was a teenager—you weren’t allowed to be gay in my high school, so no one ever came out—but I can see it now. *The Scarlet Letter* wants us to know that happiness isn’t possible if you’re living a lie. It also understands that living your truth might not be easy, that you might have to pay a high price for that luxury. But the price for hypocrisy—for living a false life—is even higher.

So this is my mea culpa, Mr. Hawthorne. *The Scarlet Letter* is an amazing novel—passionate, grotesque, horrifying, heartbreaking, and weirdly uplifting. Everyone should read it. Not because it’s good for us—though it *is*—but because it illuminates our world. More than any other American novel, *The Scarlet Letter* knows who we are and how we got this way. It doesn’t just remind us who we used to be in the bad old days when “religion and law were almost identical,” it points the way to a different and brighter future, where a truer life might be possible.

-- Tom Perrotta