

Humanities Out There Lesson 3: Historical Allegory

1. Why are the Puritans important?

Why are they not 100% important?

2. When did the events in *The Scarlet Letter* supposedly occur?

When was *The Scarlet Letter* actually written?

Allegory – A story in which characters, settings, or events stand for other people or events, or abstract ideas. An allegory is like a whole system of symbols that all fit together.

Read the passage on the right with your group.

3. Interpret this symbolic image: “cast away the fragments of a broken chain”

4. Interpret this symbolic image: “imbibed this spirit”

5. What words in the passage could allegorize events in Hawthorne’s own day?

6. What evidence here or elsewhere in the book suggests that Hester is a revolutionary?

7. What evidence here or elsewhere in the book suggests that Hester is **not** a revolutionary?

Standing alone in the world – alone, as to any dependence on society, and with little Pearl to be guided and protected – alone, and hopeless of retrieving her position, even had she not scorned to consider it desirable – she cast away the fragments of a broken chain.

The world's law was no law for her mind. It was an age in which the human intellect, newly emancipated, had taken a more active and a wider range than for many centuries before. Men of the sword had overthrown nobles and kings. Men bolder than these had overthrown and rearranged – not actually, but within the sphere of theory, which was their most real abode – the whole system of ancient prejudice, wherewith was linked much of ancient principle. Hester Prynne imbibed this spirit.

She assumed a freedom of speculation, then common enough on the other side of the Atlantic, but which our forefathers, had they known of it, would have held to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatized by the scarlet letter. In her lonesome cottage, by the sea-shore, thoughts visited her, such as dared to enter no other dwelling in New England; shadowy guests, that would have been as perilous as demons to their entertainer, could they have been seen so much as knocking at her door.

(*The Scarlet Letter*, pp. 160–61)

1851 Review of *The Scarlet Letter* by the Reverend Arthur Cleveland Coxe

Why has our author selected such a theme? Why... should the taste of Mr. Hawthorne have preferred as the proper material for romance, the nauseous amour of a Puritan pastor, with a frail creature of his charge, whose mind is represented as far more debauched than her body? Is it, in short, because a running underside of filth has become as requisite to a romance, as death in the fifth act to a tragedy? ... Is the flesh, as well as the world and the devil, to be henceforth dished up in fashionable novels, and discussed at parties, by spinsters and their beaux, with as unconcealed a relish as they give to the vanilla in their ice cream? We would be slow to believe it, and we hope our author would not willingly have it so, yet we honestly believe that "the Scarlet Letter" has already done not a little to degrade our literature, and to encourage social licentiousness: it has started other pens on like enterprises, and has loosed the restraint of many tongues, that have made it an apology for "the evil communications which corrupt good manners." We are painfully tempted to believe that it is a book made for the market, and that the market has made it merchantable, as they do game, by letting everybody understand that the commodity is in high condition, and smells strongly of incipient putrefaction.

2006 Reviews of *The Scarlet Letter* from the Amazon.com website

The novel talks about sex, sin, a single mother, and an illegitimate child... how can you go wrong with such a combination, right? Um. NO.

I say stop living in the past. Maybe 100 years ago this was a pretty exciting book, but now it's 2006 and I find this book probably the worst thing I've ever read.

This book is like a bad soap. No action. No drama. Very predictable.

I'm sure in the 1850's this was a wonderful book, but the fact that they make high school students read this book now is just plain homicide.

I'm sure I would be able to understand the symbolism in this book much better if Hawthorne were not writing in some sort of moon man language. I don't know about the production of narcotics in the 1800's, but I honestly think that Hawthorne wasn't on a natural high if you know what I'm saying.

The only way this novel could give me a warm feeling is if I place it in a furnace.

8. Your job is to restore the controversial nature that *The Scarlet Letter* had for its original readers in the 1850s. You have several options.
- You could use Hawthorne's characters but change the plot to allegorically reflect modern issues like immigration, terrorism, AIDS, drugs, etc.
 - You could use Hawthorne's basic plot ("sex, sin, a single mother, and an illegitimate child") but put it in a more recent historical setting.
 - You could change both the plot and the historical setting, as long as your story still revolves around a crime and a scarlet letter.