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❧ PART 1 ❧

Introduction - Chapter 5

PRE-GRAMMAR | Preparation

Prepare the student for understanding the Central One Idea by drawing upon his or her prior knowledge or experience.

1. Hawthorne discovers the scarlet letter, the object that inspires his tale, in a forgotten upper story of the Custom-House where he works. Imagine an object that seems to embody to you some very human story, whether of love, or loss, or struggle. Take some time to describe the object's appearance and how you came across it.
2. Now consider what meaning may be evident in the objects you see around you: the chair you're sitting in, the rug beneath it, a picture frame on the shelf, a unique mug, etc. What might someone imagine of these objects if they were found collecting dust in an old Custom-House? Choose one and briefly describe what it reveals about your life today.

GRAMMAR | Presentation **LOGIC | Dialectic**

In the Grammar section, the student is presented with and discovers essential facts, elements, and features of the novel through the Reading Notes, Words to Be Defined, and Comprehension Questions.

In the Logic section, the student reasons with the facts, elements, and features of the play; sorts, arranges, compares, and connects ideas – and begins to uncover and determine the Central One Idea.

The Custom-House: Introductory to "The Scarlet Letter"

READING NOTES

NOTE: The most difficult and colloquial words are explained in the footnotes of the Ignatius Critical Edition; thus the Reading Notes will feature some of the words, but not all.

1. **Chapter One** – Hawthorne’s autobiographical introduction to his tale ought to be considered as part of the text, and thus interpreted carefully. Hawthorne conceals an important clarification of his intentions with the story – that he means to write a symbolic tale and not a historical account or period piece – within a humorous “explanation” of how he came upon the story’s subject matter. His autobiographical introduction should be considered every bit as fictional as the tale itself.
2. **Custom-House** – A Custom-House is a government office building used in the management of commercial imports and exports. Hawthorne describes this setting as wholly mercantile and stifling. His choice to begin his tale here contrasts with the much more natural, spacious, and imaginative setting of the rest of the novel.
3. **sensuous sympathy of dust to dust** (p. 9) – the physical body’s affinity for the physical earth, as felt through the senses
4. Hawthorne establishes himself as editor of the story he wants to tell in *The Scarlet Letter*. This enables him both to separate his work from that of a historian, as well as interpret the events of his story, discovering their symbolic significance and crafting his tale into a great work of literature. His introduction does not prove any historical validity, but rather serves to establish his tale as a meaningful work of fiction.

WORDS TO BE DEFINED

Definitions Bank

determination; firmness	sluggishness; inactivity
to speak or write in detail	having little strength or energy
ruined or spoiled	disliking activity
to talk idly	

1. and then, a native reserve being thawed by this genial consciousness, we may **prate** of the circumstances that lie around us (p. 4)
2. at the base and in the rear of the row of buildings, the track of many **languid** years is seen in a border of unthrifty grass (p. 5)
3. he has no conception of the oyster-like **tenacity** with which an old settler, over whom his third century is creeping, clings to the spot where his successive generations have been imbedded. (p. 12)
4. On emerging from the Old Manse, it was chiefly this strange, **indolent**, unjoyous attachment for my native town, that brought me to fill a place in Uncle Sam's brick edifice, when I might as well, or better, have gone somewhere else. (p. 12)
5. As he possessed no higher attribute, and neither sacrificed nor **vitiating** any spiritual endowment by devoting all his energies and ingenuities to subserve the delight and profit of his maw, it always pleased and satisfied me to hear him **expatiate** on fish, poultry, and butcher's meat, and the most eligible methods of preparing them for the table. (p. 19)
(Note: You'll need to give 2 answers here.)
6. The same **torpor**, as regarded the capacity for intellectual effort, accompanied me home, and weighed upon me in the chamber which I most absurdly termed my study. (p. 36)



Read "*The Custom-House: Introductory to 'The Scarlet Letter'*" (pp. 3-46), marking the text in key places according to the method taught in "*How to Mark a Book.*"

WORDS TO BE DEFINED

1. to talk idly
2. having little strength or energy
3. determination; firmness
4. disliking activity
5. ruined or spoiled; to speak or write in detail
6. sluggishness; inactivity

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. The image of an American eagle adorns the Custom-House entrance. The eagle is described as particularly frightening: *"she appears, by the fierceness of her beak and eye and the general truculency of her attitude, to threaten mischief to the inoffensive community"* (p. 5). The severity of Hawthorne's description seems to surpass a general understanding of justice or might.
2. The atmosphere of the Custom-House is oppressive, stifling, and decrepit.
3. The author's progenitors are remembered for their strict, merciless moral character.
4. *"What I saw in him ... were the features of stubborn and ponderous endurance, which might well have amounted to obstinacy in his earlier days; of integrity, that, like most of his other endowments, lay in a somewhat heavy mass, and was just as unmanageable and unmanageable as a ton of iron ore ..."* (pp. 22-23). The author seems to admire the General's dignity and enduring strength, as well as his association with past deeds of glory, only alluded to in the text.
5. The scarlet letter itself
6. Hawthorne humorously titles his introductory segment the "Posthumous Papers of a Decapitated Surveyor."

SOCRATIC DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. There are three reasons, slightly related, that Hawthorne lists for writing "The Custom-House": 1) To be understood by his readers, 2) to develop some relation to the reader, and 3) to establish himself as editor of the tale. He also betrays a desire to clearly identify his tale as a **romance** and to prepare his readers to interact with the **symbolic significance** of the tale. Hawthorne accomplishes this through a lengthy discussion of history and nostalgia, his discovery of the scarlet letter, and its contrast with the **symbolically** void, mercantile environment of the Custom-House.
2. Hawthorne is uneasily attached to his place of birth. His ancestral home necessarily recalls an era of heavy-handed moral justice, which obviously displeases him. One's connection to the sometimes dark and complex past therefore seems inescapable.
3. The Custom-House is stuffy and commercial; the author's study is warm, secluded, and gently lit by moonlight. One environment inspires mindless labor; the other inspires creativity. The half-light of the moon liberates Hawthorne's imagination, a freedom not provided in the Custom-House: *"This warmer light [of a coal-fire] mingles itself with the cold spirituality of the moonbeams, and communicates, as it were, a heart and sensibilities of human tenderness to the forms which fancy summons up"* (p. 37).

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. What **image** adorns the Custom-House entrance? How is it described?
2. Describe the **setting** or atmosphere of the Custom-House.
3. For what are the author's progenitors remembered?
4. What sort of person is the Collector – also called the General – and why does the author admire him?
5. What does the author find on a forgotten upper story of the Custom-House?
6. What is Hawthorne's proposed pen name, mentioned near the end of the chapter?

SOCRATIC DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (LOGIC | Dialectic) May be verbally discussed or answered in written form in your Literature Notebook.

1. According to the author, what is the **purpose** of his introduction? (List at least two reasons.)
2. What is the narrator's connection to his "natal earth," to which he **alludes** three times in the text?
3. **Contrast** the atmosphere of the Custom-House with that of the author's study. What aspects of **setting** inspire his writing? What does the Custom-House lack in this regard?

Chapter 1

READING NOTES

1. **The first chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*** is conspicuously short. Hawthorne uses this chapter to introduce the central themes of the book. Both in “The Custom-House” and “The Prison-Door,” Hawthorne reveals his characteristic caution as a writer. His style might be compared with a sprinter setting his feet before the start of a race. He is establishing his literary symbols and carefully saturating them with meaning. This short first chapter seems to be inviting us to read the chapter twice.
2. **Connotation and Denotation** – Students should grow accustomed to reading Hawthorne’s writing according to **connotation**, associations with words reaching beyond their literal meaning, and **denotation**, a word’s literal definition. This means not only comprehending the events, characters, settings, and objects in the tale, but also their conceptual significance. For example, when Hawthorne points out that a **cemetery** and a **prison** must be included in a new colony, he implies the indelible presence of death and wrongdoing in every human society, as cemeteries and prisons are necessary only for managing these darker elements of human experience.
3. **The rosebush** – Hawthorne’s use of the rosebush outside the prison door exceeds **connotation** to fulfill a more significant **allegory** in the text. This allegorical meaning is not explicit, but can be discovered in a careful analysis of the context. The Comprehension and Socratic Discussion Questions for this chapter tend towards this end. Making observations such as these results in the most productive reading of the novel and is essential to grasping Hawthorne’s style of writing.

WORDS TO BE DEFINED

1. a perfect society
2. sympathetic; agreeable
3. unpromising; foreboding

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. A cemetery and a prison
2. The prison
3. Rust and weathering
4. weeds and wild herbs, but also a rosebush
5. Either it was wild, surviving as the town developed around it, or it miraculously sprang up in the footsteps of a victim of Puritan religious rigidity.

WORDS TO BE DEFINED

Definitions Bank

unpromising; foreboding a perfect society
sympathetic; agreeable

1. The founders of a new colony, whatever **Utopia** of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities (p. 47)
2. such unsightly vegetation, which evidently found something **congenial** in the soil that had so early borne the black flower of civilized society, a prison. (p. 48)
3. Finding it so directly on the threshold of our narrative, which is now about to issue from that **inauspicious** portal (p. 48)



Read Chapter 1: "The Prison-Door" (pp. 47-48) marking the text in key places according to the method taught in "How to Mark a Book."

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. What two things does Hawthorne say are included in every new colony?
2. What does Hawthorne call "the black flower of civilized society"?
3. What features **associate** the prison-door with age?
4. What plants are growing near the prison-door?
5. According to Hawthorne, where might the rosebush have come from?

SOCRATIC DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (LOGIC | Dialectic)
 May be verbally discussed or answered in written form in your Literature Notebook.

1. Why are a cemetery and a prison necessary in every society?
2. *The rust on the ponderous ironwork of its oaken door looked more antique than any thing else in the new world. Like all that pertains to crime, it seemed never to have known a youthful era.* (p. 47)

In this **simile**, Hawthorne connects the appearance of the prison door to a notion of crime's agedness. What is Hawthorne suggesting about crime in this quote? Why does he assume that all crime is old? Based on your own consideration of the origins of crime, do you think his observation is accurate? Think of an example of something that "pertains to crime" that also seems inherently old.

3. List some of the ways in which a rosebush or rose is generally **allegorized**. What concepts are usually related to its use as an image in other books, popular songs, famous works of art, etc.?
4. Hawthorne introduces the rosebush as an important **symbol** in this chapter. What does he say this symbol might mean to a prisoner entering or exiting the prison? In other words, what is the rosebush a token of? Include a direct quote in your answer.
5. Why might Hawthorne want us to "pluck" a rose and ponder it before reading on?

SOCRATIC DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Answers may vary. Through these two **allegorical** places, Hawthorne emphasizes the indelible presence of death (burial of the body) and wrongdoing (punishment of crime) in every human society.
2. This quote indicates a theoretical idea that all things pertaining to crime and wrongdoing carry an aura of age about them. Relying on a broad generalization of human experience, Hawthorne introduces an idea of original sin—that evil is very old and has always been present in human life. Students' responses to this notion may vary widely and are well worth discussing. One example of Hawthorne's idea worth noting is the notion that judges must be elderly individuals. Justice requires the wisdom of age, because it responds to an ancient problem of sin.
3. Answers may vary. Some examples of the abstract concepts regularly associated with roses are love, beauty, hardship (thorns), or temporality.
4. Hawthorne considers the rosebush as a fragrant balm amid trouble (the rose among thorns), and directly links this balm to Nature's care of living things: "... in token that the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to [a person]" (p. 48).

5. *"It may serve, let us hope, to symbolize some sweet moral blossom, that may be found along the track, or relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow"* (p. 48). Answers to this question will vary widely. Students should take time to consider the implications of Hawthorne's comments, as well as the quote above. This frailty and sorrow are represented, respectively, by the eventual wilting of the rose and the prick of its thorns. This in turn relates to the indelible presence of death and wrongdoing—that is, cemeteries and prisons—introduced earlier in the chapter. While interacting with this tragedy, Hawthorne wants us never to forget the sweet scent and beauty of the flower. There is a beauty that grows from life's thorny tangle. Hawthorne also seems to be encouraging his readers to handle his symbolism patiently, carefully observing and becoming immersed in the multifaceted nature of his subject matter.

Chapter 18

WORDS TO BE DEFINED

Definitions Bank

hampered; fettered	an outpouring, outflowing
mark of disgrace	formal conversation; conference
freedom of choice	

1. But Hester Prynne, with a mind of native courage and activity ... had habituated herself to such **latitude** of speculation as was altogether foreign to the clergyman. (p. 194)
2. She had wandered, without rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness; as vast, as intricate and shadowy, as the untamed forest, amid the gloom of which they were now holding a **colloquy** (p. 194)
3. At the head of the social system, as the clergymen of that day stood, he was only the more **trammelled** by its regulations, its principles, and even its prejudices. (p. 195)
4. The **stigma** gone, Hester heaved a long, deep sigh, in which the burden of shame and anguish departed from her spirit. (p. 197)
5. And, as if the gloom of the earth and sky had been but the **effluence** of these two mortal hearts, it vanished with their sorrow. (p. 197)



Read Chapter 18: "A Flood of Sunshine" (pp. 194-199), marking the text in key places according to the method taught in "How to Mark a Book."

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. What kind of supposed freedom has Hester gained from wearing the scarlet letter?
2. What does Dimmesdale decide to do, after having spoken with Hester?

WORDS TO BE DEFINED

1. freedom of choice
2. formal conversation; conference
3. hampered; fettered
4. mark of disgrace
5. an outpouring; outflowing

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. Having been already condemned by the law, Hester enjoys a freedom from it—she is beyond its reach, having suffered its fury already. Her freedom is akin to nature's wildness.
2. Dimmesdale decides to leave the settlement and sail back to England.

3. This quote indicates the notion of original sin, which has been present in the novel since Hester's appearance at the prison door. Hester and Dimmesdale can expect consequences to follow their guilty actions and a wound that will never fully heal in this life.
4. Hester removes the scarlet letter and casts it beside the brook.
5. Dimmesdale seems nervous, even afraid of Pearl, asking Hester if Pearl will love him.

SOCRATIC DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Hester endures public shame and ridicule for her crime, accepts it, and lives through it. Having grown accustomed to her ignominy, she finds a freedom beyond the reach of the law of the settlement, discovering that its condemnation cannot utterly destroy her. Dimmesdale, on the other hand, has not made this discovery. He stands perpetually condemned by that law in his own heart, having never confessed to his sin. Hester's wound has healed; Dimmesdale's remains fresh.
2. Answers may vary. Students should be asked to read very carefully to ascertain whether or not Hawthorne seems to support Dimmesdale's choice. The text, however subtly, leads readers to mistrust Dimmesdale's action and the excitement that follows. Simply casting the scarlet letter aside—avoiding confession and the satisfaction of guilt—hardly seems a sufficient resolution to the story.

3. *And be the stern and sad truth spoken, that the breach which guilt has once made into the human soul is never, in this mortal state, repaired.* (p. 195)

What does this quote assert about the human condition? What can Hester and Dimmesdale expect on account of their guilt?

4. What does Hester cast beside the babbling brook in the forest?
5. How does Dimmesdale feel towards Pearl as he awaits her approach?

SOCRATIC DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (LOGIC | Dialectic) May be verbally discussed or answered in written form in your Literature Notebook.

1. Briefly **compare** and **contrast** Hester's and Dimmesdale's experiences with their guilt over the seven-year interim.
2. *The decision once made, a glow of strange enjoyment threw its flickering brightness over the trouble of his breast. It was the exhilarating effect – upon a prisoner just escaped from the dungeon of his own heart – of breathing the wild, free atmosphere of an unredeemed, unchristianized, lawless region. His spirit rose, as it were, with a bound, and attained a nearer prospect of the sky, than throughout all the misery which had kept him grovelling on the earth.* (p. 196)

Dimmesdale, in this passage, has adopted Hester's view of their guilt. He has, as it were, cast aside his own **figurative** scarlet letter. Discuss the justice of this action and the verity of his feelings in response. Is he right to do this?