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# Chapter 1

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## 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

### 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?