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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

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.