

**AMERICAN LITERATURE / HONORS AMERICAN LITERATURE  
SUMMER READING ASSIGNMENT 2021**

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**UTOPIA AND DYSTOPIA**

Utopia is the idea of a perfect world, one in which all the problems of society have been solved and people live in harmony with one another and with their surroundings. Dystopia is the opposite, a world in which present ills become more pronounced and the worst in human nature becomes predominant.

Mainstream American culture was founded on a utopian vision; European settlers came here with the idea of creating a society founded in their own image, according to their own ideals—a “city upon a hill,” as Puritan minister John Winthrop (quoting the book of Matthew) put it. For many, however, the reality of American society has failed to live up to that ideal, and even today some of us live in the fear that the troubles of today—nuclear proliferation, terrorism, ecological catastrophe, financial meltdown, racism, civil unrest—will dominate our future. Thus both the utopian vision and the dystopian vision are fundamental parts of the American worldview.

Your reading assignment this summer is designed to get you to think about the relevance of utopia and dystopia to American culture and American literary traditions. This will be one of the major themes we will examine in our American literature class this year.

You will read two books for your summer reading assignment this year, *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne and *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood. Together, these two books provide a framework for discussing the utopian/dystopian vision of the New World from opposite ends of the timeline: one tale predating the founding of our country and the other set in the future.

**READING ASSIGNMENT:**

***The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne**

*The Scarlet Letter* is set in 17<sup>th</sup> century Boston—now a major American city, then a small settlement established by Puritan colonists from England hoping to create their ideal society on a new continent—but written during the Romantic era of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The novel concerns an adulterous woman, Hester Prynne, who is forced to live apart from society, a constant reminder to all that sin is still part of their lives, whatever Utopia they had hoped to found here. Hester’s quest to find purpose and grace in her life is counterbalanced by the stories of her vengeful husband, her wily and willful daughter, and a minister who cannot forgive himself for his own hypocrisy. This is a dense novel with some long sentences and a lot of challenging vocabulary—give yourself plenty of time to work with it!

Please also read the attached note on “The Custom-House,” which is the introduction to the novel.

(continued on next page)

## ***Oryx and Crake*, Margaret Atwood**

*Oryx and Crake* presents a dystopian future (and, beyond that, a post-apocalyptic future) in which the world is ravaged by a genetically-engineered plague. Paradoxically, we see elements of a utopia within the larger chaos of this world. This is a contemporary novel (published in 2003) that seems eerie in the way that it takes familiar aspects of our culture (computer technology, genetic engineering, the pharmaceuticals industry) and projects them into a not-so-distant future.

**MATURE CONTENT WARNING:** *Oryx and Crake* does include some disturbing content, but I am confident that with responsible discussion in the classroom we can come to a reasonable understanding of why Atwood includes these elements in this novel. If you have any questions about the book or would like to request an alternate choice for your reading assignment, contact me at any point over the summer.

**Read and annotate** each novel thoroughly. You will be held accountable for your reading when we begin class in the fall, so make sure that you have highlighted passages that you find to be important, especially those that develop the theme we are focusing on.

You are welcome to use a print copy or a digital copy of either book, according to your preferences, but please note that electronic versions of *The Scarlet Letter* are available at very low cost or free of charge.

### **WRITING ASSIGNMENTS:**

**1. WRITTEN RESPONSES:** For **each** book, you will write responses to the following topics:

- A. Which characters, situations, or themes from the book did you find most memorable? Why?
- B. What do you think this book says about American culture? Though the book is set in another era, how does it relate to the times we live in?
- C. Find two quotations (from each book) that you consider meaningful and explain how each contributes to your understanding of the novel. Explain how the quotation develops an essential insight into the personality of a character, how it develops one of the book's major themes, or how it represents a particular quality of style or tone.

You should write a total of about 400-500 words for each book (not for each topic!). Put some careful thought into your ideas.

**2. CREATIVE WRITING:** Write a typed page from the perspective of a character from one of these books. Be creative, but also prove to me that you know the character in question and understand his or her motivation, values, and style of speaking. (You do not need to write a separate piece for each novel – choose one.)

**3. ESSAY:** After we spend a few days discussing the summer reading, you will be expected to write an analytical essay; the topic will be discussed in class beforehand.

## A NOTE ON "THE CUSTOM-HOUSE"

"The Custom-House" (hereafter TCH) is the introduction to *The Scarlet Letter* (hereafter TSL). It sets up a narrative frame for the novel, but it is not necessary to read TCH in order to understand the rest of the novel. Most English teachers skip over it because it can be particularly excruciating for students to read. *I'm not going to require you to read it, but I do want you to know why it is an important part of the novel.* Please feel free to read it if you feel compelled, but you don't have to.

TCH is narrated by someone bearing the same name as the author himself. The Nathaniel Hawthorne of TCH is a somewhat fictionalized version of the author; the fictionalized element turns out to be the crucial one in the context of this book. Both Hawthorne the real-life person and Hawthorne the narrator were writers who needed a day job to support their families. Out of necessity, both spent time working in a custom-house in Salem, Massachusetts, where shipped goods were inspected and taxes levied. The custom-house is rife with bureaucracy and inefficiency, and some colorful characters inhabit the place. Hawthorne writes about the day-today drag of life in the custom-house and satirizes the clerks and inspectors who work there as dull-witted and lazy. Some of the characters whom Hawthorne satirized were easily recognizable as real-life figures, and some feathers were quite ruffled when this sketch was first published. Hawthorne falls into a mental torpor himself while working there, and he characterizes his experiences in the custom-house by noting that

Literature, its exertions and objects, were now of little moment in my regard. I cared not, at this period, for books; they were apart from me. Nature,—except it were human nature,—the nature that is developed in earth and sky, was, in one sense, hidden from me; and all the imaginative delight, wherewith it had been spiritualized, passed away out of my mind. A gift, a faculty, if it had not departed, was suspended and inanimate within me. (loc 381-384)

This alienation from the literary arts and from nature corresponds with Romantic and Transcendentalist attitudes about the dehumanizing effects of modern commercial society. It is only when Hawthorne is removed from his political-spoils position at the custom-house (after James K. Polk is voted out of the White House; Hawthorne had many friends with political connections) that his mind is liberated and he engages once more in the creative process. The novel that follows is the result.

The novel, however, is not entirely the product of the imagination. TSL is a historical novel based on Hawthorne's interpretation of seventeenth century New England Puritan society. Hawthorne is himself a descendant of early Puritan settlers, and he uses both imagination and historical fact to conjure up an image of "that first ancestor" who was "invested by family tradition with a dim and dusky grandeur" and "present to my boyish imaginations, as far back as I can remember" (loc 141-142). Much of Hawthorne's attitude toward the Puritans can be summed up in his portrait of this ancestor

who came so early, with his Bible and his sword, and trode the unworn street with such a stately port, and made so large a figure, as a man of war and peace  
.... He was a soldier, legislator, judge; he was a ruler in the Church; he had all the Puritanic traits, both good and evil. He was likewise a bitter persecutor; as witness the Quakers, who have remembered him in their histories, and relate an incident of his hard severity towards a woman of their sect, which will last longer, it is to be feared, than any record of his better deeds, although these were many. His son, too, inherited the persecuting spirit, and made himself so conspicuous in the martyrdom of the witches that their blood may fairly be said to have left a stain upon him. (loc 144-150)

In short, this ancestor, like the Puritans in general, was narrow-minded, judgmental, and self-righteous. To clarify his attitude toward his ancestors, Hawthorne subsequently claims,

I, the present writer, as their representative, hereby take shame upon myself for their sakes, and pray that any curse incurred by them ... may be now and henceforth removed. (loc 152-154)

Though the custom-house presents a trap of sorts for Hawthorne, it also inadvertently provides the means by which his imaginative powers become restored, as shall be demonstrated momentarily.

So far, the historical Hawthorne and his fictional counterpart are one and the same, more or less. At this point in the narrative, however, the fictional Hawthorne makes a crucial discovery that compels him to embrace his imaginative faculties once again. By chance, he finds in the musty corners of the custom-house an ancient package containing documents relating a story from the Puritan era. The story related in these pages is the one that Hawthorne works into the novel, or “romance,” that follows. Among the papers, Hawthorne also finds a richly embroidered letter

of fine red cloth, much worn and faded. There were traces about it of gold embroidery ... It had been wrought ... with wonderful skill of needlework; and the stitch (as I am assured by ladies conversant with such mysteries) gives evidence of a now forgotten art, not to be recovered even by the process of picking out the threads. (loc 458-461)

This object is in fact the scarlet letter “A” of the novel’s title. The documents and the scarlet letter are the fictional aspects of TCH; Hawthorne uses these items as a trope (or figurative device) to set up the frame of the novel and to give further depth to the story. This kind of trope is common in novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; other examples include Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* and Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. Each tale, though in fact entirely fictional, is presented as a true story “discovered” by the writer whose name graces the cover of the book.

This kind of figurative device is typical of the intricately textured designs of TSL. The scarlet letter itself—“the mystic symbol, subtly communicating itself to my sensibilities, but evading the analysis of my mind” (loc 467-468)—is the central symbol of the novel. Other powerful symbols introduced in TCH include those of the mirror (or looking-glass) and that of moonlight, both of which stimulate new perceptions in the mind and draw on the Romantic emphasis on finding new ways of seeing. The looking-glass enables us to see “a repetition of all the gleam and shadow of the picture, with one remove farther from the actual, and nearer to the imaginative” (loc 538). Similarly, moonlight

in a familiar room, falling so white upon the carpet, and showing all its figures so distinctly,—making every object so minutely visible, yet so unlike a morning or noontide visibility,—is a medium the most suitable for a romance-writer to get acquainted with his illusive guests. (loc 522-524)

The “illusive guests” here are those that Hawthorne has drawn up from the past through his powers of imagination, and in his mind they take on dimension and form all their own. The “invigorating charm of Nature” (loc 517)—an element that figures strongly in Romantic literature— is ultimately what allows Hawthorne to break free from the confines of the custom-house and to resume his career as a writer. Unlike the Transcendentalists, though, who were liberated by their experiences of nature and their separation from society, Hawthorne is thoroughly embedded in human society, with all its flaws, and the story that follows TCH is one that explores the darker aspects of human nature.