

## English 11/Honors English 11: American Literature Summer Reading Assignment 2022

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You will read two books for your summer reading assignment this year: *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne and a title of your choice taken from the list in this handout. Together, these two books will introduce you to the themes that dominate American literary history.

### *REQUIRED READING*

#### ***The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne (1850)**

Though written in the Romantic era of the 19th century, *The Scarlet Letter* is set in 17th 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. The novel concerns an adulterous woman, Hester Prynne, who is forced to live apart from society. She serves as 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. You are not required to read “The Custom-House” as long as you read this handout first.

Please begin your reading with *The Scarlet Letter*. As you read, observe the themes/motifs listed below. You can then draw on this list to make comparisons as you work on your elective reading.

#### *Themes/motifs:*

- the relationship between the individual and society
- nature v. civilization
- private guilt v. public shame
- gender roles (specifically standards for sexual behavior, and how men and women are judged differently)
- romantic love v. marriage
- appearance v. reality.

### *SUMMER READING ELECTIVE OPTIONS—CHOOSE ONE!*

***Oryx and Crake*, Margaret Atwood (2003).** This dystopian novel is set in the not-too-distant future, when corporations run society and technology exerts an influence on every aspect of human life. A talented genetic engineer named Crake places the fate of the human species in his own hands, while his childhood friend Jimmy suffers the consequences. A clever, highly readable novel with much that reflects on our current society. Content warning: This novel involves child sexual abuse, prostitution, drug use, and capital punishment.

***Catch-22*, Joseph Heller (1961).** This classic World War II satire pivots on the absurdity of modern military-industrial bureaucracy. Air Force pilot Yossarian just wants to complete

enough missions to get rotated back home and out of harm's way, but a mysterious and ubiquitous rule called Catch-22 hinders him at every turn. Somewhat lengthy, but a blast to read. Content warning: This novel relies heavily on irreverent humor and includes violence and sexual content.

***The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison (1970).*** American master Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* focuses on the lives of adolescent black girls growing up in the 20th century in small-town Ohio. Issues of race, class, and gender are filtered through the heart-wrenching story of Pecola Breedlove, as told by her friend Claudia. A challenging but highly rewarding read. Content warning: This novel includes a scene depicting sexual assault against a minor.

***There There, Tommy Orange (2018).*** This novel chronicles the lives of contemporary Native Americans living in Oakland. Full disclosure from Mr. Patterson: I am reading this novel right now and *love* it, and I will provide a full content overview as soon as I am able to do so. Content warning: This novel includes drug/alcohol-related content and gun violence.

***Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion, Jia Tolentino (2019).*** This collection of nonfiction essays examines the theme of defining one's selfhood in the digital era. Tolentino, a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, discusses her ideas on social media, celebrity, and gender roles by reflecting on her personal experiences and on recent high-profile stories in the media. Not every essay in this collection will appeal to your experiences as teenagers, but you will see a lot here that seems very familiar. Content warning: The author discusses her personal history of drug use.

***The Age of Innocence, Edith Wharton (1920).*** This novel of manners tells the story of Newland Archer, a member of the New York social elite during the Gilded Age of the late 19th century. Newland's eyes are opened to the shallowness of his own social milieu through his acquaintance with the scandalous Countess Olenska, and soon he has to choose between her and his traditional, seemingly innocent fiancé, May Welland. Wharton presents an incisive examination of social mores and American culture, but the writing style is a challenge to some readers. No content warning required.

***How Much of These Hills Is Gold, C. Pam Zhang (2020).*** This contemporary novel tells the story of Chinese immigrants in California during the Gold Rush of the 19th century. Newly orphaned siblings Lucy and Sam struggle to make their way in the world after the death of their parents, using stories from their past to navigate their way through a rugged Western landscape. A very compelling read with much pathos and a plot that is at times very brisk. A refreshingly new perspective on themes related to the American West. Content warning: This novel depicts sexual assault and prostitution.

## *READING AND WRITING ASSIGNMENTS*

**Read and annotate** each book 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 themes we are focusing on.

You are welcome to use a print copy or a digital copy of either book, according to your preferences.

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

- A. Which characters, situations, and themes from the book did you find most memorable? Why?
- B. What do you think this book says about American culture? Even if 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 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-to-day 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 himself, however, falls into a mental torpor while working at the custom-house, 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 Allen 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.