

## Chapter One: The Prison Door

### COMMENTARY: CHAPTER ONE

From the opening description of the townspeople in this chapter, readers have a clear image of life **in a Puritan New England town**. For example, the **clothing** of all the spectators standing outside the prison door is “sadcolored” and “gray,” illustrating the **Puritans’ rejection of anything frivolous** or colorful. These people are somber and serious; fun and festivity do not intrude in their lives.

In their practicality, the first institutions they created after settling this new, supposedly utopian, community were a **cemetery and a prison**. Although the Puritans hoped to create a more perfect life in the new world, the old problems of death and crime still plague them. Implicitly, the narrator questions the possibility of creating a utopian society: Will humans ever be able to create the world of virtue and happiness dreamed of by these early New England settlers? This narrator thinks not. Notice how strongly he presents his ideas to the reader through his choice of words. By emphasizing in the novel’s opening sentence the **dark, dreary**, overly-serious attitude of the Puritans, he implicitly critiques their repressive lifestyle. The narrator’s interpretive intrusions into the text become more explicit by the end of this chapter. Along with a description of the townspeople, the novel’s opening sentence paints a clear picture of the **prison door**. “[H]eavily timbered” and “studded with iron spikes,” the prison door is ominously associated with torture and oppression. Like the men’s clothing, the prison is presented as “dark” and “gloomy,” an effect that has only been heightened by age. That this gloomy **edifice of punishment was one of the first buildings created by the Puritan**

settlers suggests their punitive, almost despotic approach to life. Clearly, difference is not tolerated by this culture. The narrator tells us that the rust on the prison door looks more antique than any other aspect of the new world, implying that crime and punishment are ancient, unavoidable elements of human life—things that can't be escaped even in the new world's supposedly "virgin soil." Even nature seems to recognize the oppressiveness of this building, so the vegetation growing near the prison is ominous and ugly: Burdock, pig-weed, and other unattractive weeds grow in the grass plot near the prison, helping to make it the "black flower of civilized society." What images are conjured up by this notion of a "black flower"? Something that doesn't exist in nature, the black flower represents a blighting of the natural world, an ugly and unsightly tumor.

Overall, the imagery in these first paragraphs of the novel indicates a world that is gloomy, ugly, and unnatural. Certainly, the narrator appears critical of this society, and he is setting us up to like Hester, the prisoner lurking behind the iron door, in contrast to her severe wardens. The contrast between Hester and the townspeople is first suggested with the introduction of the wild rosebush. In contrast to all the ugliness of the prison and the people, this fragrant bush grows on one side of the door to the prison. An important symbol, the wild rose connotes beauty, the natural world, and morality. Unlike the unsightly weeds growing in front of the prison, this beautiful bush is covered with "delicate gems" and offers "fragrance and fragile beauty" to the criminal condemned to life in the "black flower" of the prison. Many readers think that the narrator associates the rose's wild beauty with Hester. The narrator theorizes that the "deep heart of Nature" is perhaps offering this gift to humanity and, in particular, to Hester, who will see its beauty each time she walks out of the prison door. A contrast is therefore created between the black flower the unnatural and ugly creation of humanity—and the beautiful rose created by

nature. While civilization is corrupting and unsympathetic toward human frailty, nature is bountiful and forgiving.

The **rosebush** has further connotations: It is associated with the “**sainted Ann Hutchinson**,” under whose step it sprung when she, like Hester, walked through the prison door. Like Hester, Hutchinson was shunned and rejected by Puritan society, which believes that absolute conformity is necessary for public safety in the New World. A woman preacher and an *antinomian* (a believer in the Christian doctrine that faith alone is important for salvation, not obedience to institutional or moral law), **Hutchinson was a threat to the Puritanical belief in absolute obedience to law**. By invoking Hutchinson, the narrator implicitly asks the reader to question whether Puritan law was justified in condemning Hester. (Hutchinson would probably say “no,” and she might ask who is judging the judges.) That the narrator sides with Hutchinson against the Puritan community is obvious: He refers to her as “sainted.” Both Hester and Ann Hutchinson, two female renegades, are associated with the wild beauty of the rosebush, a relationship that allows the narrator to create reader sympathy for Hester’s situation even before she’s officially entered the novel. Finally, the narrator symbolically plucks a bloom from this beautiful, fragrant bush and offers it to the reader as an image of “some sweet moral blossom.” This symbol will remind us of beauty, of morality, and of the wholesomeness of the natural world as we read this dark story of human sorrow. In associating morality with a wild, natural blossom, the narrator implies that his view of morality may differ from that of the Puritans, who glean their ideas of morality from the Bible rather than from the natural beauty that surrounds them. The narrator explicitly tells the reader how to interpret the symbol of the bloom. Why has Hawthorne created a narrator who so often **intrudes on the story**? First, he may have felt that narrative explanation was necessary because his story is set in such a distant time: Without the

narrator's comments, a modern reader might not catch the full significance of the story's symbols. In addition, the narrator's direct comments to the reader give the story a conversational feel, as if the reader is sitting in front of a fire listening to the story being told by an older and wiser friend. Although short, this first chapter accomplishes a great deal. It introduces the Puritan community, which it links with images of oppression, darkness, and gloom. It provides us with an important symbol—the wild rosebush—that is linked with Hester, beauty, morality, and nature. Finally, it introduces us to the fairly intrusive narrator who will guide our reading experience by offering us both implicit and explicit commentary on and interpretation of the events described in the novel.

## **Glossary**

(Here and in the following chapters, difficult words and phrases, as well as allusions and historical references, are explained.)

**Cornhill** part of Washington Street. Now part of City Hall Plaza.

**Isaac Johnson** a settler (1601-1630) who left land to Boston; he died shortly after the Puritans arrived. His land would be north of King's Chapel (1688), which can be visited today.

**burdock** any of several plants with large basal leaves and purpleflowered heads covered with hooked prickles.

**pigweed** any of several coarse weeds with dense, bristly clusters of small green flowers. Also called lamb's quarters.

**apple-peru** a plant that is part of the nightshade family; poisonous.

**portal** here, the prison door.

**Anne Hutchinson** a religious dissenter (1591-1643). In the 1630s she was excommunicated by the Puritans and exiled from Boston and moved to Rhode Island.