

TIPS FOR READING HAWTHORNE'S *THE SCARLET LETTER*

Hawthorne's style is typical of Nineteenth Century romantic American writing. Compared to modern authors, his sentences are long and contain excessive punctuation. He uses flowery diction and phrases, and a technique called "litotes," which makes an affirmative statement using negative words. The final challenge is his vocabulary, which to the modern student reader can seem difficult. Once you get used to his style, and learn to deal with the vocabulary (don't skip words you need to know to make meaning!), he's much easier to read.

Steps that will help a great deal are:

- Think about what you already know about the subject. Listen in class. Talk with others. The more you know before you read, the more you will get from what you read.
- Look over the piece (the passage on an AP prompt, or a chapter) you are about to read. Note its length. Read the first and last paragraphs. Try to figure out what this particular "chunk" of text is about, where does it start and end, what's going on, and what might its purpose might be?
- Read aloud, paying attention to punctuation. Often you will "hear" the meaning.
- Reread. It's important to just do the hard work. If at first you don't get it, read it again! Be tough. Stick with it. Go to the text; don't expect it to come to you.
- Read when you are fresh, and read in blocks of time that are just right for you. Don't read in little, tiny bits, or plan to read great numbers of pages at one time. Hawthorne is too dense for most students to be able to use either of these extremes of time.

1. FIND THE CORE OF LONG SENTENCES AND PAY SPECIAL ATTENTION TO DASHES

Compare the two versions of the same sentences to see how Hawthorne uses dashes.

It is a little remarkable, that--through disinclination to talk overmuch of myself and of my affairs at the fireside, and to my personal friends--an autobiographical impulse should twice in my life have taken possession of me, in addressing the public. The first time was three or four years since, when I favored the reader--inexcusably, and for no earthly reason, that either the indulgent reader or the intrusive author could imagine--with a description of my way of life in the deep quietude of an Old Manse. And now--because, beyond my deserts, I was happy enough to find a listener or two on the former occasion--I again seize the public by the button, and talk of my three years' experience in the Custom-House.

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2. SIMPLIFY AND PARAPHRASE FLOWERY DICTION AND PHRASES

A. Original Style

"though disinclined to talk overmuch of myself and my affairs at the fireside, and to my personal friends..."

Modern Style

"though not inclined to talk very much about myself or what I do by a fire or with my friends..."

B. Original Style

"an autobiographical impulse should twice in my life have taken possession of me"

Modern Style

"twice I've had an urge to write about myself."

C. Original Style

"the wearers of petticoat and farthing gale"

Modern Style

"women"

3. BE ON THE ALERT FOR LITOTES (Stating the affirmative through the negative)

"The age had not so much refinement, that any sense of impropriety restrained the wearers of petticoat and farthing gale from stepping forth in to the public ways, and wedging their **not unsubstantial persons**, if occasion were, into the throng nearest to the scaffold at an execution."

(Translation: The age was unrefined, so no sense of propriety kept hefty women from going into the streets and pushing right to the front near the scaffold to watch an execution.)

"The women who were now standing about the prison-door stood within less than half a century of the period when the man-like Elizabeth had been the **not altogether unsuitable representative** of the sex."

Translation—now you try the one above:

4. IDENTIFY THE ANTECEDENT/REFERENCES.

A revelation, he [Roger Chillingworth] could almost say, had been granted to him [Roger Chillingworth]. It [_____] mattered little for his object, whether celestial or from what other region. By its [_____] aid, in all the subsequent relations betwixt him and Mr. Dimmesdale, not merely the external presence, but the very inmost soul of the latter [_____], seem to be brought out before his [_____] eyes, so that he [_____] could see and comprehend its [_____] every movement.

Fill in the correct antecedents/references in the blanks provided. The first two have been done for you.

5 BE AWARE OF THE DENSITY OF STYLISTIC DEVICES IN HAWTHORNE'S WRITING.

Can you identify the oxymoron, rhetorical question, exclamatory sentence, loose sentence, and parallel structure Hawthorne uses in the passage below? Explain in simple terms what he is saying.

But Arthur Dimmesdale! Were such a man once more to fall, what pleas could be urged in extenuation of his crime? None; unless it avail him somewhat that he was broken down by long and exquisite suffering; that his mind was darkened and confused by the very remorse which harrowed it; that, between fleeing as an avowed criminal, and remaining as a hypocrite, conscience might find it hard to strike the balance; that it was human to avoid the peril of death and infamy, and the inscrutable machinations of an enemy; that, finally, to this poor pilgrim, on his dreary and desert path, faith, sick, miserable, there appeared a glimpse of human affection and sympathy, a new life, and a true one, in exchange for the heavy doom which he was now expiating.

6. USE THE CHAPTER TITLES TO GUIDE YOUR READING

Each chapter is tightly unified and has a name that signals the main topic. The names are especially useful for reviewing the book.

- I. The Prison-Door
- II. The Market-Place
- III. The Recognition
- IV. The Interview
- V. Hester At Her Needle
- VI. Pearl
- VII. The Governor's Hall
- VIII. The Elf-Child And The Minister
- IX. The Leech
- X. The Leech And His Patient
- XI. The Interior Of A Heart
- XII. The Minister's Vigil
- XIII. Another View Of Hester
- XIV. Hester And The Physician
- XV. Hester And Pearl
- XVI. A Forest Walk
- XVII. The Pastor And His Parishioner
- XVIII. A Flood Or Sunshine
- XIX. The Child At The Brook-Side
- XX. The Minister In A Maze
- XXI. The New England Holiday
- XXII. The Procession
- XXIII. The Revelations Of The Scarlet Letter
- XXIV. Conclusion