

FREE PRINTABLE QUIZ

The Scarlet Letter

The Custom-House

Nathaniel Hawthorne · 11 questions with a full answer key and explanations

What's inside

- **11 multiple-choice questions**, including passage analysis with the original text printed above it — the way your English class asks it.
- **Answer key** on its own page so you can take the quiz first.
- **Explanations** for every question, so a wrong answer teaches you something.
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The quiz

The Scarlet Letter — The Custom House. Answers begin on the answer key page.

PLOT & EVENT

1. While searching the unfinished second-story room of the Custom-House, what historical artifact package does the narrator discover?

- A. A tin box containing the commercial ledgers and private journals of King Derby
- B. A bundle of British provincial tax records left behind by loyalist merchants during the Revolution
- C. A yellow parchment commission of Surveyor Jonathan Pue containing a red cloth letter and explanatory manuscript
- D. A locked chest holding the court transcripts and execution warrants from the Salem witch trials

PLOT & EVENT

2. What political event brings the narrator's three-year term as Custom-House Surveyor to an abrupt end?

- A. The election of General Zachary Taylor to the presidency and the subsequent Whig sweep of public offices
- B. The complete shutdown of the Salem port due to the centralization of shipping commerce in Boston
- C. A formal investigation launched by the Essex Historical Society into missing colonial documents
- D. A local municipal revolt led by the aggrieved descendants of Quaker and Puritan families

CHARACTER

3. How does the narrator characterize the long-serving permanent Inspector of the Custom-House?

- A. As a bitter, vengeful partisan obsessed with unmasking political corruption
- B. As an almost purely physical being dominated by appetite and instincts rather than spiritual or intellectual depth
- C. As a guilt-ridden veteran seeking penance for actions committed during the Revolutionary War
- D. As a meticulous, scholarly antiquarian who spent decades cataloging Salem's historical records

CHARACTER

4. What fundamental cause does the narrator identify for his persistent, instinctive attachment to Salem?

- A. His profound admiration for the lively modern commercial bustle along the harbor
- B. The intellectual stimulation provided by his daily associations with local authors and philosophers
- C. The deep, centuries-long physical embedding of his family's generations into the local soil
- D. His personal desire to rehabilitate the town's reputation through public political office

MICRO-DETAIL

5. According to the narrator's precise physical measurement, what are the dimensions of the fabric letter 'A' found in the parchment roll?

- A. Each limb measures precisely three inches and a quarter in length
- B. Each arm is exactly two and a half inches from corner to point
- C. The symbol is four inches tall and wrought across a five-inch field of velvet
- D. The letter forms a six-inch border with half-inch gold borders on all edges

MICRO-DETAIL

6. What specific physical and emotional sensation does the narrator experience when he places the scarlet cloth against his breast?

- A. An icy shudder that causes his limbs to grow completely numb
- B. A feeling of burning heat, as though the fabric were made of red-hot iron
- C. A soothing warmth comparable to the feather-down of the federal eagle
- D. A stinging pain akin to being pricked by fine sewing needles

MICRO-DETAIL

7. How does the flag flying above the Custom-House formally distinguish the building as a civil rather than military installation?

- A. The national banner displays thirteen stripes oriented vertically instead of horizontally
- B. The crest features an olive branch instead of thunderbolts and arrows in the eagle's talons
- C. The field consists of a white ground bearing a single golden anchor and scale of justice
- D. The flag is hoisted only during morning business hours and lowered precisely at midday

ANALYTICAL

8. What symbolic critique does Hawthorne convey through his description of the carved American eagle hovering over the Custom-House entrance?

- A. He celebrates the federal government as a benevolent protector of international trade and maritime safety
- B. He satirizes the perilous illusion of government shelter, warning that political patronage is inherently fierce and unfaithful
- C. He suggests that republican governance has successfully eliminated the martial violence of Old World monarchies
- D. He illustrates the aesthetic superiority of American civil architecture over decaying colonial structures

ANALYTICAL

9. How does Hawthorne conceptualize the psychological and spiritual impact of long-term government employment ('Uncle Sam's gold') on a man's character?

- A. It fosters civic virtue and strengthens independent moral self-reliance
- B. It provides essential leisure that refines artistic taste and fuels creative output
- C. It acts like an enervating enchantment that erodes personal strength, initiative, and manly independence
- D. It transforms otherwise peaceful citizens into aggressive, tyrannical rulers

READ THIS PASSAGE, THEN ANSWER

Thus, therefore, the floor of our familiar room has become a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other. Ghosts might enter here, without affrighting us.

PASSAGE ANALYSIS

10. In this passage, how does Hawthorne define the ideal imaginative atmosphere required for writing a 'Romance'?

- A. As a rational, well-lit study free from superstitious domestic illusions
- B. As a medium where moonlight and firelight spiritualize the ordinary, creating a neutral ground between the Actual and the Imaginary
- C. As an unmediated transcription of broad daylight and raw historical documents
- D. As a total withdrawal from domestic settings into deep, unpopulated wilderness

READ THIS PASSAGE, THEN ANSWER

"What is he?" murmurs one gray shadow of my forefathers to the other. "A writer of story-books! What kind of a business in life—what mode of glorifying God, or being serviceable to mankind in his day and generation—may that be? Why, the degenerate fellow might as well have been a fiddler!"

PASSAGE ANALYSIS

11. What core cultural conflict between the narrator and his Puritan ancestors is highlighted in this excerpt?

- A. The ancestors condemn his political loyalty to the Democratic party as treasonous
- B. The ancestors deem imaginative writing an idle, worthless pursuit that fails to glorify God or serve practical society
- C. The narrator rejects their maritime mercantile careers in favor of military conquest
- D. The narrator accuses them of being weak-willed leaders who lacked religious discipline

Answer key

Check your answers here, then read the explanations on the next page.

1. C	2. A	3. B	4. C	5. A
6. B	7. A	8. B	9. C	10. B
11. B				

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Answers explained

Why the right answer is right — and what the question is really testing.

1. C. A yellow parchment commission of Surveyor Jonathan Pue containing a red cloth letter and explanatory manuscript

In the unfinished hall, the narrator uncovers a package wrapped in Governor Shirley's commission to Jonathan Pue, which contains the embroidered scarlet letter 'A' and notes detailing Hester Prynne's history.

2. A. The election of General Zachary Taylor to the presidency and the subsequent Whig sweep of public offices

The presidential election of Whig candidate General Zachary Taylor leads to the figurative political 'decapitation' of the narrator, a Democratic appointee.

3. B. As an almost purely physical being dominated by appetite and instincts rather than spiritual or intellectual depth

The narrator portrays the permanent Inspector as a marvel of physical health and animal contentment, possessing abundant gourmand appetites but virtually no moral, emotional, or intellectual sensibilities.

4. C. The deep, centuries-long physical embedding of his family's generations into the local soil

The narrator explains that his feeling for Salem is not born of aesthetic love or moral harmony, but is an instinctive 'sensuous sympathy of dust for dust' due to his ancestors having lived and died there for over two centuries.

5. A. Each limb measures precisely three inches and a quarter in length

The text explicitly records the exact measurement of the relic: each limb of the capital letter 'A' measured precisely three and a quarter inches.

6. B. A feeling of burning heat, as though the fabric were made of red-hot iron

When holding the relic to his breast, the narrator feels an almost physical sensation of burning heat, causing him to involuntarily drop the letter to the floor.

7. A. The national banner displays thirteen stripes oriented vertically instead of horizontally

Hawthorne notes that the national flag flying from the roof has its thirteen stripes turned vertically, which legally designates a civil post of the government.

8. B. He satirizes the perilous illusion of government shelter, warning that political patronage is inherently fierce and unfaithful

Hawthorne depicts the truculent eagle as threatening rather than comforting, observing that applicants foolishly imagine an 'eider-down pillow' only to be cast off with scratches, dabs, or barbed arrows.

9. C. It acts like an enervating enchantment that erodes personal strength, initiative, and manly independence

Hawthorne compares dependence on federal wages to 'the Devil's wages,' arguing that reliance on the government robs an individual of natural vigor, self-reliance, and moral strength.

10. B. As a medium where moonlight and firelight spiritualize the ordinary, creating a neutral ground between the Actual and the Imaginary

Hawthorne theorizes that romance flourishes in a 'neutral territory' where domestic objects are transformed by the cold spirituality of moonlight and the warmth of coal-fire, harmonizing the actual with the imaginary.

11. B. The ancestors deem imaginative writing an idle, worthless pursuit that fails to glorify God or serve practical society

The passage illustrates the stern Puritan viewpoint that viewing storytelling as a career is degenerate and useless, equating a writer of story-books to a mere fiddler.

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