

Pre-reading Activity for *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne
Student Handout

The following activities are designed to help you with the language in *The Scarlet Letter*. Nineteenth century Romantic American writing typically possesses some or all of the following:

- Long sentences and dashes
- Flowery diction
- Litotes
- Other stylistic devices including, but not limited to, oxymoron, rhetorical questions, exclamatory sentences, loose sentences, periodic sentences and parallel structure. (We will review each of these).

Nathaniel Hawthorne uses all of the above in *The Scarlet Letter*, but perhaps the most challenging aspect to his work for students is the language. Once you get used to his style, and learn the vocabulary, he's much easier to read!

TIPS FOR READING

* Hawthorne titles all his chapters. This too is typical of nineteenth century literature. Reading the title of the chapter then the first and last paragraphs of the chapter, will give you good idea what you are to derive from the rest of the chapter.

* **DO NOT SKIP OVER WORDS YOU DON'T KNOW!** While it can be tedious, taking the time to look up a word unfamiliar to you will help with your comprehension. One word omitted could take away the meaning for you.

* Read aloud and pay attention to punctuation.

* Reread what you do not understand the first time. Be willing to do the hard work.

* Avoid reading in small increments or big chunks. Read in blocks of time that work for you.

SIMPLIFY AND PARAPHRASE FLOWERY DICTION AND PHRASES

Practice simplifying and paraphrasing passages. Read the original text then "translate" into modern language. The first two have been done for you as examples.

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."

Adapted from V. Stevenson, PHHS, by Jennifer Curl, LGHS

- C. Original style
“the wearers of petticoat and farthing gale”

Modern style

- D. Original style
“Finding it so directly on the threshold of our narrative...”

Modern style

- E. Original style
“It had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and enclosing her in a sphere by herself.”

Modern style

LOOKING FOR LITOTES

A litotes is an understatement in which an affirmative is expressed through negative words, as in
“That’s not bad at all!”

Read the following passage (litotes in bold), then read the translation.

“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.”
(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.)

Now read the next passage and try to translate the entire passage yourself.

“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.”

Your translation:

IDENTIFYING THE ANTECEDENT AND REFERENCES

An antecedent is an earlier clause, phrase or word to which a pronoun, another word or a noun refers back. Example: “But **Arthur Dimmesdale!** Were such a man once more to fall, what please could be urged in extenuation of **his** crime? Here, Arthur Dimmesdale is the antecedent to “his.” Clear identification of an antecedent can change or muddle the meaning of an entire passage. Practice identifying the antecedents and their replacements by filling in the correct antecedent/reference in the blanks. The first couple have been done for you.

- A. “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.
- B. “Had there been a Papist among the crowd of Puritans, he [] might have seen in the beautiful woman, [Hester Prynne] so picturesque in her [] attire and mien, and with the infant at her [] bosom, an object to remind him [] of the image of Divine Maternity, which so many illustrious painters have vied with one another to represent; something which should remind him, [] indeed, but only by contrast of that sacred image [] of sinless motherhood, whose infant [] was to redeem the world.

LONG SENTENCES AND 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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