

# FEATURED WRITER

## Nathaniel Hawthorne

By Leo Rizzuti



*The year is 1848, and a weary and dejected man, his mind full of troubled thoughts and second guesses, trudges his way along a pathway leading to his front door. He has just been relieved of his illustrious position at the Salem Custom House, duties that afforded him community prestige and respect, but also the only reliable income for himself, his wife and their newborn son. Further compounding an already stressful situation, he had been an ardent and outspoken critic of the newly elected president, a decision that had not only led to his dismissal, but would surely make him a source of local gossip, public disdain and a pariah in future dealings with any newly empowered legislators.*

*He arrives at his front door and takes a moment to gather his thoughts. Determinedly, he lifts his head and opens the door, ready to break the news to the one person that has been his most constant supporter. "Sophia, as was expected, I've been let go," he simply states. Does she chastise his opinionated nature, or else fling herself against their meager furnishings, bemoaning the fate that has befallen them? No, instead, a beaming smile appears on her face and she rushes into the master bedroom. He follows her, as this was clearly the least likely of her potential reactions. She meets him at the doorway, almost laughing, holding fistfuls of dollars above her head. "At last," she breathes excitedly. "I've been saving a little from every trip to the market for the last four years! Thank God you're finally rid of that job! Now you can focus on your writing."*

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born, patriotically enough, on July 4, 1804 in Salem, Massachusetts.

His father, a sea captain, died of yellow fever when Nathaniel was only four years old, forcing his mother to gather her son and two daughters and take residence with nearby relatives. Afterwards, the Hawthornes bounced around from location to location, sometimes acting as boarders on local farmland, oftentimes returning to live with family members. It was during these formative years that Nathaniel found writing as a form of expression, going so far as to concoct home-made newspapers, distributing them amongst distant family members in an effort to maintain ties.

Persuaded by an uncle to attend Bowdoin College against his will in 1821, young Nathaniel was an uncommitted student at best, preferring to spend his time imagining tales rather than focusing on his studies. However, it was during this time that he struck up a friendship with a fellow classmate and the future President of the United States, Franklin Pierce, as well as other notables such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Associations such as these would have lasting influences in the life of the future author.

Hawthorne met his wife Sophia became engaged to her in 1836. A transcendentalist and illustrator, Sophia was not Nathaniel's original romantic target, but rather her sister Elisabeth, with whom Hawthorne had been publicly flirting for months. It was, however, an excellent match, enough so that being in Nathaniel's company caused Sophia's previously chronic migraines to all but disappear, and pleasant enough that Nathaniel went so far as to join a transcendental Utopian community in order to earn money for their marriage. His job: shoveling manure.

After their wedding on July 9, 1842, Nathaniel and Sophia began raising a family, she soon giving birth to the first of their three children. Being in a politically appointed position, Nathaniel lost his job when he used his writing skills to speak out against the candidacy of Zachary Taylor, who was elected to the Presidency and appointed new staff in support of his administration. Sophia's great forethought in saving any money that she could manage was the great tide-turner in Nathaniel Hawthorne's life, allowing him the free time and energy to pursue his life's dream as a writer. Scarcely two years after this event America saw the arrival of one of the finest pieces of period literature come out of what most would consider a great tragedy: *The Scarlet Letter*.

*The Scarlet Letter* was an immediate hit, selling 2,500 copies in only ten days as one of America's first mass-produced books. Widely regarded as one of the finest pieces of American literature ever, it was not Nathaniel's only great work. The following year saw the publication of *The House of the Seven Gables*, buttressed immediately by *The Blithedale Romance* and a collection of short stories, *A Wonder-Book for Girls and Boys*. All told, Nathaniel Hawthorne eventually published nearly a dozen novels, several biographies and histories and scores of short stories before his death on May 19, 1864. Today he is regarded by most as the first truly American writer and the standard by which all writers, from his contemporaries to the present day, are measured. To this writer, he is simply the greatest example of uncommon talent empowered by the faith, support and resourcefulness of an extraordinary spouse.

Selected novels:

*Fanshawe* (1828)

*The Scarlet Letter* (1850)

*The House of the Seven Gables* (1851)

*The Blithedale Romance* (1852)

*Grandfather's Chair* (1856)

*The Marble Faun* (1860)

*The Dolliver Romance* (1863)

Collections:

*Twice-Told Tales* (1837)

*Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846)

*The Snow-Image* (1852)

*A Wonder-Book for Girls and Boys* (1852)

*Tanglewood Tales* (1853)