CHAPTER I: The Prison-Door

In this first chapter, Hawthorne sets the scene of the novel—Boston of the seventeenth century. It is June, and a throng of drably dressed Puritans stands before a weather-beaten wooden prison. In front of the prison stands an unsightly plot of weeds, and beside it grows a wild rosebush, which seems out of place in this scene dominated by dark colors.

A throng of bearded men, in sad-colored garments and gray, steeple-crowned hats, intermixed with women, some wearing hoods, and others bareheaded, was assembled in front of a wooden edifice, the door of which was heavily timbered with oak, and studded with iron spikes.

[The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison. In accordance with this rule, it may safely be assumed that the forefathers of Boston had built the first prison-house, somewhere in the vicinity of Cornhill, almost as seasonably as they marked out the first burial-ground, on Isaac Johnson's lot, and round about his grave, which subsequently became the nucleus of all the congregated sepulchres in the old church-yard of King's Chapel. Certain it is, that, some fifteen or twenty years after the settlement of the town, the wooden jail was already marked with weather-stains and other indications of age, which gave a yet darker aspect to its beetle-browed and gloomy front. The rust on the ponderous iron-work of its oaken door looked more antique than anything else in the new world. Like all that pertains to crime, it seemed never to have known a youthful era. Before this ugly edifice, and between it and the wheel-track of the street, was a grass-plot, much overgrown with burdock, pig-weed, apple-peru, and such unsightly vegetation, which evidently found something congenial in the soil that had so early borne the black flower of civilized society, a prison.] But, on one side of the portal, and rooted almost at the threshold, was a wild rosebush, covered, in this month of June, with its delicate gems, which might be imagined to offer their fragrance and fragile beauty to the prisoner as he went in, and to the condemned criminal as he came forth to his doom, in token that the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to him.

This rosebush, by a strange chance, has been kept alive in history; but whether it had merely survived out of the stern old wilderness, so long after the fall of the gigantic pines and oaks that originally overshadowed it,—or whether, as there is fair authority for believing, it had sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Ann Hutchinson, as she entered the prison-door,—we shall not take upon us to determine. Finding it so directly on the threshold of our narrative, which is now about to issue from that inauspicious portal, we could hardly do otherwise than pluck one of its flowers and present it to the reader. It may serve, let us hope, to symbolize some sweet moral blossom, that may be found along the track, or relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow.

I. VERSION : Traduire le passage entre crochets.

II. QUESTIONS :

1. What is the narrative strategy chosen by the author? Do not forget to explain what are its effects on the reader.
2. Write a detailed analysis of the image of the rose-bush.
TRADUCTION

Une foule d’hommes barbus, en vêtements de couleurs tristes et chapeaux gris à hautes calottes en forme de pain de sucre, mêlée de femmes, certaines portant capuchon, d’autres la tête nue, se tenait assemblée devant un bâtiment de bois dont la porte aux lourdes traverses de chêne était cloutée de fer.

Quel que soit le royaume d’Utopie¹ qu’ils aient, à l’origine, projeté de construire en vue de la vertu et du bonheur des hommes, les fondateurs d’une colonie ont invariablement dû placer au premier rang de leurs obligations pratiques la nécessité d’allouer à un cimetière un morceau de terrain vierge où ils allaient bâtir et un autre morceau à l’emplacement d’une prison.

En conséquence de cette règle, on peut être assuré que les ancêtres de Boston ont construit la première prison de leur ville dans le voisinage de Cornhill² avec tout autant d’à-propos qu’ils creusèrent dans le lotissement d’Isaac Johnson³ cette première tombe autour de laquelle devaient venir se grouper ensuite toutes les tombes du cimetière de King’s Chapel. Et quelque quinze ou vingt ans après la fondation de la colonie, la prison portait sûrement déjà les traces du passage des saisons et d’autres marques encore de vieillesse qui assombrissaient un peu plus sa morne façade couleur de hanneton. La rouille des pesantes serrures de sa porte de chêne avait l’air plus ancien que n’importe quoi d’autre dans le Nouveau Monde. Comme tout ce qui touche au crime, elle semblait n’avoir jamais eu de jeune temps. Devant le vilain édifice, et le séparant de l’ornière des roues de charrettes qui traçait la rue, il y avait un carré tout envahi de chardons, de chiendent, de bardanes. Ces mauvaises herbes trouvaient évidemment quelque chose de conforme à leur nature dans un sol qui avait porté de si bonne heures cette fleur maudite de la société civilisée qu’est une prison. Mais, d’un côté du portail et presque sur le seuil du bâtiment sinistre, un rosier sauvage avait pris racine. Il était, en ce mois de juin, tout couvert de ses fleurs délicates. Et ces fleurs pouvaient passer pour offrir leur parfum et leur beauté fragile au prisonnier qui entrait ou au condamné qui sortait pour marcher vers son destin, prouvant ainsi combien le cœur généreux de la nature savait être indulgent.

Grâce à un heureux hasard, ce buisson de roses a été conservé par l’histoire. Mais a-t-il simplement survécu à l’austère vieille végétation sauvage, aux pins et aux chênes gigantesques, depuis si longtemps abattus, qui l’aurait ombragé à sa naissance ; ou jaillit-il comme certaines autorités donnent à le croire, sous les pas de la sainte Ann Hutchinson⁴ alors qu’elle franchissait la porte de la prison ? Nous ne prendrons pas sur nous d’en décider. Le trouvant juste au seuil de notre récit qui va, tout à l’heure, se mettre en route de derrière cette porte de mauvais augure, nous ne pouvions guère faire autrement que de cueillir une de ses roses pour la tendre au lecteur. Elle symbolisera, espérons-le, une fleur rédemptrice qui pourrait peut-être doucement poindre chemin faisant ou, tout au moins, éclairera une bien sombre histoire de faiblesses et de douleurs humaines.

¹ Voir Thomas More, Utopia, 1515.
² Il s’agit aujourd’hui de Washington Street, à Boston.
³ Johnson mourut l’année de son arrivée, en 1630. C’est sur ses terres que furent établis le cimetière, la prison et l’église.
A FEW WORDS ON THE AUTHOR

Novelist and short story writer, a central figure in the American Renaissance. Like Edgar Allan Poe, Hawthorne took a dark view of human nature. He was a romantic who believed in imagination and emotion and who rejected pure intellect. This romanticism is underlined by the Gothic atmosphere of his tales and novels. He was also one of the first American writers to explore the hidden motivations of his characters.

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born in 1804 in Salem, Massachusetts. Between the years 1825 and 1836 Hawthorne worked as a writer and contributor to periodicals. His first novel, *Fanshawe*, appeared anonymously at his own expense in 1828. The work was based on his college life. It did not receive much attention and the author burned the unsold copies. In 1842 Hawthorne became friends with the Transcendentalists in Concord, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who also drew on the Puritan legacy. Hawthorne then married Peabody, an active participant in the Transcendentalist movement, and settled with her in Concord.

*The Scarlet Letter* was a critical and popular success. The illicit love affair of Hester Prynne with the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale and the birth of their child Pearl, takes place before the book opens. In Puritan New England, Hester, the mother of an illegitimate child, wears the scarlet A (for adulteress, named in the book by this initial) for years rather than reveal that her lover was the saintly young village minister. Her husband, Roger Chillingworth, proceeds to torment the guilt stricken man, who confesses his adultery before dying in Hester's arms. Hester plans to take her daughter Pearl to Europe to begin a new life. Toward the end of the dark romance Hawthorne wrote: “Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!”

Hester Prynne has been seen as a pioneer feminist in the line from Anne Hutchinson to Margaret Fuller, a classic nurturer, a sexually autonomous woman, and an American equivalent of Anna Karenina. The influence of the novel is apparent in Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899), and in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930). Hawthorne's daughter Una served as the model for Pearl.

He died on May 19, 1864, in Plymouth, N.H. on a trip to the mountains with his friend Franklin Pierce.

COMMENTARY: INTRODUCTION

This opening chapter introduces several of the images and themes within the story to follow. These images will recur in several settings and serve as metaphors for the underlying conflict. Indeed, in this chapter, Hawthorne sets the mood for the “tale of human frailty and sorrow” that is to follow. His first paragraph introduces the reader to what some might want to consider a (or the) major character of the work: the Puritan society. What happens to each of the major characters—Hester, Pearl, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth—results from the collective ethics, morals, psyche, and unwavering sternness and rigidity of the individual Puritans, whom Hawthorne introduces figuratively in this chapter and literally and individually in the next.

THE SETTING: IMAGINATION VS REALITY
Dominating this chapter are the decay and ugliness of the physical setting (“the wooden jail was already marked with weather-stains and other indications of age, which gave a yet darker aspect to its beetle-browed and gloomy front”, “this ugly edifice”), which symbolize the Puritan society and culture (“The founders of a new colony”, “the forefathers of Boston”) and foreshadow the gloom of the novel. The two landmarks mentioned, the prison (“the first prison-house”) and the cemetery (“the first burial-ground”), point not only to the “practical necessities” of the society, but also to the images of punishment and providence that dominate this culture and permeate the entire story.

Thus, Hawthorne invented his own system for representing psychological truth as he saw it. However, his fantasy world is real to us, for the line between imagination and reality is difficult to draw in this chapter. Indeed, even though his romance is a fantasy, he uses a historical setting and the accuracy of his detail is remarkable.

The majority of Hawthorne’s work takes America’s Puritan past as its subject, but *The Scarlet Letter* uses the material to greatest effect. The Puritans were a group of religious reformers who arrived in Massachusetts in the 1630s under the leadership of John Winthrop (whose death is recounted in the novel). The religious sect was known for its intolerance of dissenting ideas and lifestyles.

Isaac Johnson, mentioned in this excerpt, was a colonist, born in England, who died in Boston, 30 September, 1630. He first came to this country with Winthrop, arriving at Salem on 12 June, 1630, and was one of the four that founded the first church at Charlestown on 30 July of that year. The lack of good water at Charlestown induced them, on 7 September, to remove to Shawmut, now Boston, which was settled under Johnson's supervision. Hawthorne, therefore, relies on real events to catch the reader’s attention.

But clearly, the reader is invited to a read a fiction (“our narrative”), not a historical report. Hawthorne has appropriated the Puritans and re-created them according to the needs of his story rather than the demands of historical scholarship. Here, he makes special note that this colony earlier set aside land for both a cemetery and a prison, a sign that all societies, regardless of their good intentions (“whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project”), eventually succumb to the realities of man’s nature (sinful/punishment/prison) and destiny (mortal/death/cemetery). In those societies in which the church and state are the same, when man breaks the law, he also sins. From Adam and Eve on, man’s inability to obey the rules of the society has been his downfall.

THE NARRATIVE STRATEGY AND ITS EFFECTS ON THE READER

This opening chapter arrests us on the threshold of the narrative and builds suspense. It also creates sympathy for the unknown person who is about to emerge through the door, and foreshadows the conflict to come. These achievements result from an accumulation of emotionally weighted details, beginning with the first sentence. Hawthorne wastes no time:

*A throng of bearded men, in sad-colored garments and gray, steeple-crowned hats, intermixed with women, some wearing hoods, and others bareheaded, was assembled in front of a wooden edifice, the door of which was heavily timbered with oak, and studded with iron spikes.*
Ask a group of readers what they picture form the phrase “sad-coloured” and you will get a variety of answers – gray, brown, black. H. leaves us free to imagine whatever particular colour suggests sadness to us as individual readers. He does not, however, give us the freedom to imagine a cheerful scene. In other words, he is more concerned to control our emotional responses than our visual images. The sadness of the scene enters even into the clothing, and is focused by the end of the sentence in the forbidding prison door with its heavy and hostile mixture of wood and iron.

In the next paragraph the door is related to the crowd assembled outside it, even to the point of becoming their representative, symbolizing their temper and spirit. This is a prison-building, cemetery-construction people. And they are contrasted in their outlook with an imagined “Utopia of human virtue and happiness”. Which is more attractive?

The chapter continues to align its images on one or the other side of this opposition., at one pole the weatherbeaten prison with its “beetle-browed and gloomy front”, which “seemed never to have known a youthful era”, an “ugly edifice” surrounded by “unsightly vegetation” which is finally transformed into the “black flower of civilized society”; at the other the “wild rose-bush”, with its “delicate gems” of “fragrance and fragile beauty”. We have no choice but to associate the prisoner with the rose bush, all the more so when we learn that it is said to have sprung up under the footsteps of the “sainted Ann Hutchinson”, whom the Puritans had persecuted for preaching her own beliefs rather than those officially held by the community. To associate the Puritans, through their prison, with ugliness, gloom, and age; to imply that the prisoner is delicate, fragile, somehow aligned to youth and beauty, is to manipulate our sympathies on her behalf.

We are further disarmed – those of us inclined to look with disfavor on criminals- when the narrator offers us a flower from the rose bush, for if we accept it we must go through the narrative metaphorically holding the prisoner’s insignia, declared one of her party. And finally, the narrator describes his story as “a tale of human frailty and sorrow” rather than one of crime or guilt, thus imposing a non-Puritan, or even anti-Puritan, interpretation of the events to come. Under the pressure of Hawthorne’s art, the condemning Puritans have become offenders, and the one they have condemned has been made attractive.

THE PRISON DOOR

The author points toward many of the images that are significant to an understanding of the novel. In this instance, he names the chapter “The Prison Door.” The reader needs to pay particular attention to the significance of the prison generally and the prison door specifically. The descriptive language in reference to the prison door—“… heavily timbered with oak, and studded with iron spikes” and the “rust on the ponderous iron-work … looked more antique than anything else in the New World” and, again, “… seemed never to have known a youthful era”—foreshadows and sets the tone for the tale that follows.

Moreover, the prison represents several different symbols. Foremost it is a symbol for the Puritanical severity of law. The description of the prison indicates that it is old, rusted, yet strong with an "iron-clamped oaken door." This represents the rigorous enforcement of laws and the inability to break free of them.
The prison also serves as a metaphor for the authority of the regime, which will not tolerate deviance. Hawthorne directly challenges this notion by throwing the name Ann Hutchinson into the opening pages. Hutchinson was a religious woman who disagreed with the Puritanical teachings. She was the unauthorized Puritan preacher of a dissident church discussion group and as a result was imprisoned in Boston. Hawthorne claims that it is possible the beautiful rosebush growing directly at the prison door sprang from her footsteps. This implies that the Puritanical authoritarianism may be too rigid, to the point of obliterating things of beauty.

THE IMAGE OF THE ROSEBUSH

The Puritan society is symbolized in the first chapter by the plot of weeds growing so profusely in front of the prison (“a grass-plot, much overgrown with burdock, pig-weed, apple-peru, and such unsightly vegetation”). Indeed, throughout the work, the nature images contrast with the stark darkness of the Puritans and their systems. But nature also includes precious things, represented by the wild rosebush The rosebush, its beauty a striking contrast to all that surrounds it (as later the beautifully embroidered scarlet A will be) is held out in part as an invitation to find “some sweet moral blossom” in the ensuing, tragic tale and in part as an image that “the deep heart of nature” (perhaps God) may look more kindly on the errant Hester and her child (the roses among the weeds) than do her Puritan neighbors. The rosebush is therefore a strong image developed by Hawthorne which, to the sophisticated reader, may sum up the whole work.

First it is wild; that is, it is of nature, God given, or springing from the “footsteps of the sainted Anne Hutchinson.” Therefore, Hawthorne cleverly links the rosebush to the wilderness surrounding Boston, commenting that the bush may be a remnant of the former forest which covered the area (“it had merely survived out of the stern old wilderness, so long after the fall of the gigantic pines and oaks that originally overshadowed it”). This is important, because it is only in the forest wilderness where the Puritans' laws fail to have any force. Thus the image of the rosebush serves to foreshadow that some of the passionate wilderness, in the form of Hester Prynne, may have accidentally made its way into Boston.

Second, according to the author, it is beautiful—offering “fragrant and fragile beauty to the prisoner”—in a field of “unsightly vegetation.”

Third, it is a “token that the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to” the prisoner entering the structure or the “condemned criminal as he came forth to his doom.”

Finally, it is a predominant image throughout the romance. Indeed, the rosebush is a symbol of passion. In full bloom (“a wild rose-bush, covered, in this month of June, with its delicate gems”), it indicates that the prisoner (Hester actually appears in the following chapter) is at the peak of her passion. This parallels the fact that Hester has just born a child as a result of her passion. The child is thus comparable to the blossoms on the rosebush. Hawthorne's comment that the rose may serve as a “moral blossom” in the story is therefore actually saying that Hester's child will serve to provide the moral of the story.

As will later become obvious, Hester Prynne’s sin is one of passion, thus linking her crime to the image of the rosebush. Hawthorne also indirectly compares Hester with Ann Hutchinson via the rosebush, and again makes the same parallel in Chapter 13, “Another View of Hester”.

Much the same sort of descriptive analyses that can be written about the rosebush could be ascribed to the scarlet letter itself or to little Pearl or, perhaps, even to the act of love that produced them both.