

Comprehension Check: The Custom House

Directions: After reading “*The Custom House Introductory*” and the short summary below, answer the following questions in complete sentences on a separate sheet of paper.

In the introduction of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne gives a semi-autobiographical account of his time working at the Salem Custom House. He also explains the history of his prominent ancestors and states that they would have been ashamed of his decision to be a writer, because it was not viewed as a career deserving of social respect. As he talks about the men that he worked with, Hawthorne goes into great detail explaining how they looked, how they spoke, and about their personalities and backgrounds. This aspect of the introduction exemplifies Hawthorne’s talent for characterization and in-depth character description. Another important part of the introduction talks about Hawthorne finding abandoned papers and a rag cut into the shape of an A. The papers told the story of a woman named Hester Prynne and her connection to the rag. Hawthorne then explains to the reader that he has tried to recreate her story as factually as possible. Finally, Hawthorne explains how he was kicked out of his position as Surveyor at the Custom House when President Taylor came into office, which then allowed him to focus his attention on Hester Prynne’s story.

1. Why is it important to read the introduction before reading the rest of the novel?
2. What is significant about Hawthorne’s mention of his ancestors in the introduction to the novel?
3. What does the focus on the Custom House and the description of his fellow workers reveal about Hawthorne?
4. Why do you think Hawthorne decided to write his introduction rather than including this information in the plotline of the story?
5. What is the importance of Hawthorne telling the audience about finding the papers and the tattered rag referring to Hester Prynne?
6. From the information given in the *Introductory* alone, write a 3-5 sentence prediction of what you think the story will be about.
7. How does Hawthorne feel about the new political party taking over at the end of the introduction? What are his political beliefs and affiliations?