New Academic Book Argues Nathaniel Hawthorne Portrayed Rumored Edgar Poe - Frances Osgood Affair in The Scarlet Letter

Attorney Andrew Barger's book: The Affair of Edgar Poe and Frances Osgood in The Scarlet Letter deconstructs Hawthorne's most beloved novel over 500 footnotes.

SARASOTA, FL, UNITED STATES, September 29, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- For 175+ years, classrooms have taught Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter as a Puritan moral allegory of sin, secrecy, and public shame. A new academic book contends that the novel also carries a second, tightly coded plot: a roman à clef of the rumored mid-1840s affair between Edgar Allan Poe and the popular poet Frances Sargent Osgood.

> Years later, when I was reading The Scarlet Letter, the characters started to jump out at me," Barger said. "It began with Minister Dimmesdale as a portrayal of Edgar Allan Poe."
>
> *Andrew Barger*

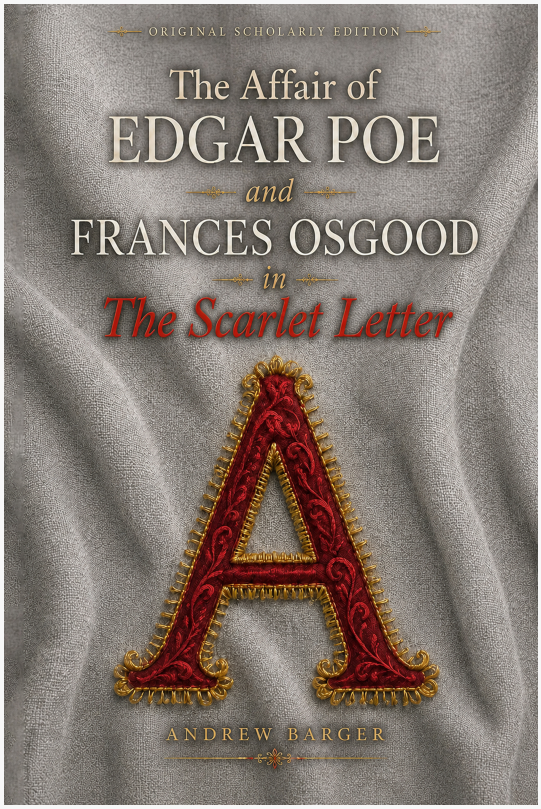
[The Affair of Edgar Poe and Frances Osgood in The Scarlet Letter]
Author: Andrew Barger
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The Affair of Edgar Poe and Frances Osgood in The Scarlet Letter, presents a watershed scholarly argument that Hawthorne recast the aftermath of the Poe-Osgood scandal in a Puritan setting.

Attorney and Poe scholar Andrew Barger, a member of the Nathaniel Hawthorne Society, the Edgar Allan Poe Society, and the Poe Society of Baltimore, compares names, appearances, temperament, craft, and biography among Hawthorne's characters and the Northeast writers of the day. Barger include photos of the authors presented.

Barger's identifications, developed across a detailed table of contents and more than five hundred footnotes, include:



Affair of Poe Osgood in the Scarlet Letter Book Cover

*Frances Sargent Osgood as Hester Prynne — a beauty whose art sells, who keeps a vow of silence about the child's father, and whose surname, Barger argues, is a transition cipher of Osgood, in a nod to Poe's well-known passion for cryptography;

*Edgar Allan Poe as the Rev. Arthur Dimmesdale — the pale, dark-eyed, dark-clad scholar with a broad forehead, a sensitive temperament, public eloquence, who places hand over his heart;

*Fanny Fay Osgood, Osgood's third child, as Pearl — the "fairy" child (Fay is an older word for fairy) whose life, like Pearl's, mixes welcome and blame; Barger submits that Mary Seward called the child "Pearl" in a memorial poem after Osgood's death;

*Rufus Wilmot Griswold as Roger Chillingworth — the grizzled, vindictive man of letters with the power to destroy a career, and the author of the notorious "Ludwig" obituary that, Barger contends, Hawthorne drew upon for Dimmesdale's worst traits;

*Elizabeth Fries Ellet as the witch, Mistress Hibbins;

*Nathaniel Parker Willis as John Wilson; and

*Thomas Dunn English as Governor Bellingham — with further correspondence for James Fenimore Cooper.

The study demonstrates that Hawthorne embedded secret ciphers in the novel and a code in its famously cryptic ending. Poe, not so subtly, hinted that Hawthorne plagiarized from him and that he should not write allegory. Barger's "Hawthorne's Fivefold Motivation" chapter yields five main reasons Hawthorne sought revenge: (1) Poe's harsh published criticism of Hawthorne, (2) Poe's Longfellow War, (3) Transcendentalist controversies around The Dial and Brook Farm, (4) Poe's lampooning of Margaret Fuller, and (5) Poe's perceived lack of morals.

Why this allegorical layer went unseen

Barger posits that two scholarly silences made the pattern easy to miss. Hawthorne specialists, he writes, have rarely possessed a detailed map of the Poe–Osgood rumor. Poe specialists, meanwhile, have often declined a full accounting of the attachment—partly from what Barger

wryly calls the “Hasn’t Poe Suffered Enough” doctrine, and partly because no one has systematically read Osgood’s poems with a view towards Poe, many published under pseudonyms.

He distinguishes his project from John Evangelist Walsh’s 1980 narrative history Plumes in the Dust, which asserted an illicit affair and the paternity of Fanny Fay but, Barger and earlier critics agree, examined too little of Osgood’s post-1845 writing and missed Hawthorne entirely.

The volume is designed for teachers, professors, and advanced students as much as for specialists. It includes daguerreotypes and illustrations, a foreword, a systematic character-by-character comparison, a conclusion and afterword, and an appendix of names.A companion teaching text, The Scarlet Letter: Edgar Poe and Frances Osgood Edition and Study Guide, reprints Hawthorne’s novel with chapter-by-chapter analysis and discussion questions keyed to the same thesis.

Andrew Barger’s website is www.andrewbarger.com; he writes on Substack at DangerousLore.Substack.com and on X as @DangerousLore.

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